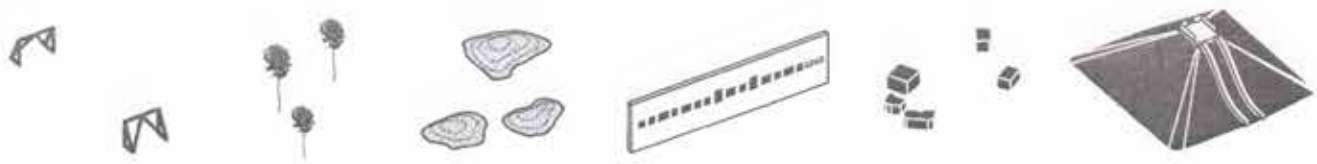
ARCHITECTURES OF ENGAGEMENT

searching for alternative approaches to context



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ARCHITECTURES OF ENGAGEMENT:
searching for alternative approaches to context

Master of Science Thesis, Architectural Design
Tampere University of Technology
Examiner: Professor Panu Lehtovuori

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an exploration of contextually engaged methods of architectural production – methods that identify the social and material values of a particular place, aiming to work closely with them. At the core of this thesis is a personal motivation: between 2015 and 2016, involvement in a community park project in Romania granted first-hand experience of working closely with the local people and material resources of a neighborhood. As a result, historical and theoretical resources merge with personal, anecdotal experience – making up a largely reflective work discussing the benefits and downfalls of contextually engaged architecture.

The work carried out in the project – Parcul Chercea – falls within two broad frameworks: the development of socially and materially engaged architecture within the architectural profession and the particular socio-spatial conditions of post-socialist Romania. These will be outlined in part one and two, to shed light on the professional and cultural context the park reactivation project took place in. Following the developments beginning from the counter-reaction to modernism for instance, it is possible to trace the source of the themes present in our project. The final part – chapter three – will outline and reflect in further detail on the stages of the project in Chercea and the outcome and value of the various activities carried out in the park.

Key words:
public space, park, post-socialist Romania, indeterminacy, context, temporary uses, participation, latent potentials

Tämän diplomityön aiheena on pohtia useita tapoja tuottaa kontekstiin sidottua arkkitehtuuria. Työn taustalla on henkilökohtainen kiinnostus aiheeseen: vuosina 2015-2016 työskentelin yhteensä kaksi ja puoli kuukautta Romaniassa projektissa, jonka tavoitteena oli uudelleen elävöittää unohdettu puisto kaupungin syrjäisimässä naapurustossa. Projektissa käytimme kontekstisidonnaisia menetelmiä, kuten osallistavia suunnitteluprosesseja ja paikallisia, yksinkertaisia materiaaleja. Omakohtainen kokemus yhdistyy yleisempään historialliseen ja teoreettiseen pohdintaan, jonka avulla avataan kontekstisidonnaisen arkkitehtuurin hyviä ja huonoja puolia.

Työn ensimmäinen luku tutkii 1950-luvulla alkaneita sosiaalisesti ja yhteiskunnallisesti kokeilevia arkkitehtuurisuuntauksia päättyen nykypäivän urbaaneihin tilapäiskäyttöihin ja määrittelemättömyyden konseptiin. Toisessa luvussa tarkastellaan post-sosialistisen Romanian erityistä suhdetta arkkitehtuuriin ja julkiseen tilaan. Luvut yksi ja kaksi taustoittavat viimeistä lukua, jossa tarkastellaan syvällisemmin projektin aikana käytettyjä menetelmiä ja näiden lopputuloksia. Tutkimus ja omakohtaisten kokemusten pohdinta diplomityössä osoittaa, että kontekstiin tiiviisti kytketty suunnitteluprosessi tuottaa arkkitehtuuria, joka vastaa paremmin käyttäjien tarpeita. Tämän lisäksi työ pyrkii osoittamaan vaihtoehtoisten suunnittelumenetelmien arvon osana arkkitehtuuria.

Avainsanat:
julkinen tila, puisto, post-sosialistinen Romania, määrittelemättömyys, konteksti, tilapäiset käytöt, osallistava suunnittelu, piilevät potentiaalit

1. DISCOVERY, REDISCOVERY: ENGAGED ARCHITECTURE

2. ROMANIA: RE-ENGAGING ARCHITECTURE

3. PLACE, POTENTIAL: ENGAGING THE MATERIAL AND SOCIAL

1. DISCOVERY, REDISCOVERY: ENGAGED ARCHITECTURE

Introduction.

This thesis aims to understand the broader significance of our actions carried out during a park reactivation project in the neighborhood of Chercea. Situated in the city of Brăila in Eastern Romania, the socio-cultural, historical and economic context for the project differs from those of Western and Northern Europe – compelling us to depart from familiar methods of site analysis and design practices. As a result, the focus of the project – and thus this thesis – will be on the search for alternative *methods* of studying and working with context. Though relevant as a product of process, discussions on design will remain minimal throughout the thesis.

The project Parcul Chercea – Park Chercea – has its beginnings as a student work at the Bergen School of Architecture in the spring of 2015. The following year, it received first place and funding through Urbaniada – a competition for projects that improve public urban space by actively engaging with local, social and material resources in Romania. As an expanded group of four people, the project continued in spring 2016, drawing to a close the following autumn. Taking the park project as its starting point, this thesis is directed and written completely by the author.

The main theme running through the thesis – and more specifically the project – is an increased engagement with context. An established point of departure in architectural practice today, methods of engagement include various levels of citizen participation, thorough mapping of locally available resources and designing for future appropriation. These actions – and many more – contribute to a fuller understanding of the context architects work in and as methods, were used by us to the same effect. *Why go through such efforts to simply understand context?* Underlying the pioneering, often experimental methods of certain 1950s architect groups was an existential need to re-establish a connection between ourselves and the environments we live in. Seen by these early architects as having eroded away the history and identity of cities, modernist planning was counteracted by 1:1 scale interventions in city space, spontaneous interaction, and socio-political agendas. These initial counter-reactions had a significance that reached beyond simply criticizing modernism: they formed the basis on which contextually engaged architecture began developing, taking shape as the participative, temporary and resource-conscious practices we know today. The first chapter of this thesis will begin by exploring the reasons behind the break with modernism and those – architects, writers, artists – who contributed to it. In the second part, a similar erosion of history and identity in architecture is outlined, this time taking place in Romania under Communism. In an effort to 'systematize' cities and society, the state exerted unrestrained power over urban and rural environments, demolishing public spaces, historical monuments, single family homes. The struggle to reclaim an obscured national identity and re-establish a balance between the citizen and public space can be seen in the socially engaged projects in Romania today.

Despite providing a foundation for numerous projects, contextually engaged approaches are still developing in architecture – in both Eastern and Western Europe. A broad range of literature exists on the subject, but few guidelines have been established – remarkable in a field where most processes and objects are precisely defined, dissected and quantified. The reasons for the lack of any explicit 'how to engage with context' directions became clear very early in the Parcul Chercea project. In order to produce meaningful architecture, something that the users feel is their own, it is necessary to familiarize with that *specific* context. Because of its 'exoticness' to us, it was not possible to impose any ready-made design solutions on Chercea. Instead, we developed methods of engagement that were specific to the neighborhood and time. The risk of misleading others with 'universal principles of context specificity' is the reason why this thesis does not aim for any 'how to' as part of the conclusion. Drawing overarching conclusions from the experiences of the project would destroy the founding argument for this work: architecture should respond to the unique conditions it is realized in.

Going hand-in-hand with the main theme of the thesis – contextual engagement – context specificity is an important subcategory, contributing to the topic of engagement. Another seemingly unrelated subcategory – indeterminacy – forms a counterpoint for context specificity when reflecting back on our actions in the park. *How can indeterminacy improve engagement with context?* Multiple forms of indeterminacy as a positive, productive force are discussed in this thesis. Following

the development of more activist-oriented architectural practices of the 1960s, notions of freedom and control were addressed within architecture. Levels of citizen participation in projects directly impacted their visual outcome. Instead of trying to impose personal aesthetic tastes, architects working with the public developed approaches that 'freed' architectural aesthetics from convention. In the participative projects of the 1960s and 1970s, the existential value of having the power to impact your own living environment took precedence over aesthetic or stylistic concerns.

Another, spatial form of indeterminacy has also proved to be a valuable resource for architects. Following the increasing fragmentation of urban, public space after Post-Modernism, 'voids' began to appear both on the peripheries and in the centers of cities. In cities like Berlin today, these spaces have become valuable resources of collective, cultural practices, contributing significantly to the identity of the city. In densely developed urban centers, spaces that lack a clear function, yet retain something of its past life also offer existential value. It is difficult to determine the exact value these spaces hold, but ongoing controversies surrounding these indeterminate 'wasteland' spaces communicate multiple values for multiple actors. In contrast to the more popular cities of Western Europe, the demographically shrinking cities of Romania – Brăila stands as a classic example – host a multitude of these neglected, abandoned spaces, particularly on the peripheries. The methods of approaching the neighborhood and the choice of working with a peripheral, neglected space in Chercea reflects exactly this lure of the indeterminate: a functionally blank expanse of land, its material being nonetheless hinting at a dormant identity, a hidden history.

The rapidly changing and uncertain conditions of cities currently have impacted notions of permanence in architecture, giving rise to a now globally ubiquitous typology: temporary urbanism. Taking on a broad range of forms, what unites this category of architecture is its publicness and responsiveness to context. An ability to flexibly take advantage of gaps in urban space or administrative structure, temporary urbanism at its best continues the task begun by the early critics of modernism: re-engaging the public with a space by drawing attention to its latent potentials. Temporary urbanism projects often reflect the conditions they were realized in, their lightweight and even rough architectural language communicating transience in both material and function and an emphasis on the social and experiential over the aesthetic.

Sections one and two conclude with an example project embodying issues discussed in the chapter. These case-studies effectively illustrate the sometimes elusive concepts of indeterminacy or spatial identity, but they also help contextualize the work carried out in Parcul Chercea, which holds within it the subjects discussed in both chapters.

1.1

Counter-reactions to modernism provoke a series of changes within the architectural field. In the political equilibrium following WWII, instead of contenting itself with continuing with the modernist tradition, there was a push from within the profession to define a relationship between architecture and the people it served. Notions of freedom, public space and democracy were explored by both well-known modernist architects and those representing a counter-movement against modernism. Instead of a sudden revolution against the status quo though, the transition toward new principles was gradual, their development continuing to this day.

Starting in mid 1940s, stirrings of a clear counter-reaction to the modernism could be detected in single architects' works as well as institutions like the CIAM, whose purpose was originally to advance the principles of the modernist movement. Instead of liberating cities of their ills, the modernist ideology seemed only to promote stifling social determinism with inflexible formalism. It falsely proclaimed the universality of singular architectural solutions and it promoted elitism within the field through a misplaced moral superiority attributed to 'pure' form. For example, architect Giancarlo de Carlo – a key figure in Team Ten – offered some of the most sharp, yet relevant critiques on modernism:

"By distancing itself from the real context of society and its most concrete environmental needs, the elite attitude of the Modern Movement just accentuated the superfluity of architecture. The old gulf due to an

Depiction of a perfect society.

ambiguous professional condition was widened by a further estrangement from reality, isolating architecture in a floating condition. This has favoured the formation of a few great free thinking spirits projecting a daring search for newness, but it has also encouraged the formation of their opposite; a multitude of walk-ons destined to nullify the novelties of the former, reducing them to inert symbols completely commensurate with the requirements of the ruling class." [1]

The above – an excerpt from a lecture by de Carlo in 1969 – reveals a substantial issue occupying some architects in the backlash against modernism: architecture had become a tool to represent the power and authority of an elite. Not only was the architect seen as an exclusive genius serving only the select few, the profession was censoring itself from within by pushing diverging voices to the margins. It seems like Modernism had overturned what it originally stood for and stopped moving toward anything new. Architecture had ceased to be relevant to the wider public, cocooning itself in its own importance.

These, as well as future developments in architecture reveal a strong need from within the profession to break outside of this stifling, self-imposed condition. New groups of architects sought new methods of working, exposing modernism's shortcomings. They aimed to understand inhabited environments differently and made some of the first attempts to engage with the public in a realistic and democratic way. By challenging modernism, architects in the West began to move from representative publicness to the actual public sphere.

1.1.1

Challenging roles, questioning boundaries. In his article *The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture Culture* Tom Avermaete describes four distinct categories of postwar architects who explored alternative, more contextually sensitive ways of practicing architecture. The syndicalists, populists, activists and facilitators each developed varied approaches to contexts and methods of engagement, challenging modern architecture's relationship to the public. Despite being some of the first attempts at more socially engaged architecture, it is possible to still detect aspects of these transitions in the work of Parcul Chercea. That similar motives, methods or design approaches are still reflected in projects today – more than half a century later – demonstrates the groundbreaking significance of these early shifts in architectural thinking.

The first group Avermaete discusses – a group of architects called GAMMA (*Groupe d'Architectes Modernes Marocains*) – played a key role in redefining architects' professional position from a mere passive tool to an independent 'syndicalist'. Syndicalists defined themselves as critical and reflective activists, involved in socio-political issues in colonial and developing countries. At the ninth congress of CIAM in 1953, GAMMA presented boards depicting how a new social class of 'urban proletariat' lived in Morocco, a country whose major cities were bursting with workers streaming in from the countryside to work in factories. By bringing this peripheral '*bidonville*' architecture to the attention of the congress, the politically left-oriented syndicalists took a condemning position on the exploitation of migrant workers' and their terrible living conditions.

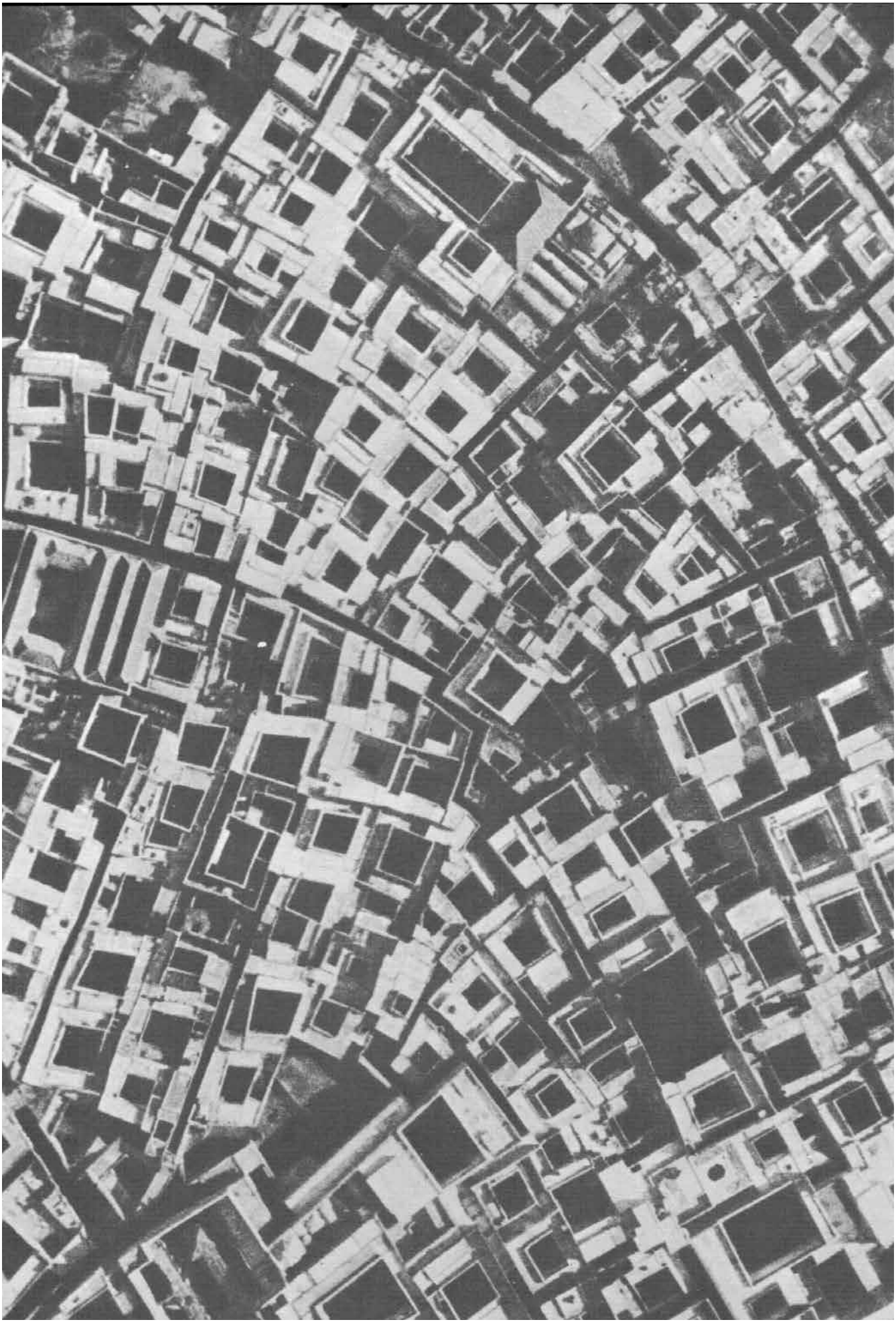
Looking closer, the motive behind the architects' efforts was a possibility of symbolic appropriation into Western architectural discourse. The building and living practices of the people were hailed by the architects as self-sufficient. In an attempt to inject relevance and 'realness' into the current architectural scene, the result was a superficial applauding of 'worker culture' accompanied by a declaration of shantytowns as a 'universal problem'. Despite the new exotic context, it seemed as if architects had not escaped the temptation to universalize very specific conditions of human habitation.

Reflecting further on the intentions of the syndicalists and the results of their efforts, it seems that exploring exotic contexts furthered the development of a new architectural methodology more than provided any real humanitarian aid or architectural significance. Exotic contexts were sought out in the West as well: students and professionals went to live in the slums of New York to 'rid themselves of a professional filter'[2] that was thought to distract from the essentials of architecture.

The descriptions and hopes of these architects can seem naive, obscured by exoticism and a predominantly Western perspective. Despite the superficial intentions, it

1 *De Carlo in Architecture and Participation, p. 7*

2 *Tzonis & Lefaivre in What People Want, p. 293*



Marrakesh city structure.

marked a turning point in the recognition and appreciation of architecture produced outside the profession. Also, the syndicalist method of working challenged the typical modernist planning processes: a top-down premeditated design was not the aim. As a method, the architects left their studio and physically went to a location to study its specific social and material conditions. They were the first to question the state of modern architecture during the 1950s.

Following the syndicalists, another group of architects continued to work with existing contexts, challenging the stark division between expert architect and everyday citizen and the perceptions of high and low culture. Described as populists by Avermaete, they recognized that viewed from the outside, designers were seen as a class. On the inside, many felt like they belonged to some elite class. Architects were seen as possessing special knowledge outside the reach of ordinary people. At its worst, the disparity between architects' visions and the way people viewed the environment would result in tragically underused public spaces. To counteract the private way the architectural elite was engaging with the built environment, the populists occupied themselves in the tastes and symbolism of the mundane and banal.

"Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things."[3]

Was mass culture in the West just another form of vernacular? It was looked to as a symbolic base for developing architecture by architects such as Scott Venturi and Denis Scott-Brown, Peter and Alison Smithson and Gordon Cullen. Cullen criticized architects overlooking street advertising as a source of inspiration and exposed architects' elitist attitudes towards 'high design' and the perceived lowly squalor produced by the everyday citizen.

"Publicity has to be accepted as available aid." [4]

Cullen saw everyday design produced by non-architects as having vitality. The Smithsons also believed popular design did not pose a threat to the practice of architecture. Fearful reactions from within architectural circles revealed a weakness: a profession shrouding itself in a frail structure of relevancy from within cannot engage in or provide useful solutions to a world it has no connection to. Despite Venturi Scott-Brown and the Smithsons' more context specific focus on their own, Western culture, there still existed an idea that universally applicable values could be extracted from their findings in American suburbia. In his article, Avermaete remarks that:

"In order to work with this basis the populist architect had to detect, analyze, and understand the use, iconography, and marketing of the popular vernacular environments." [5]

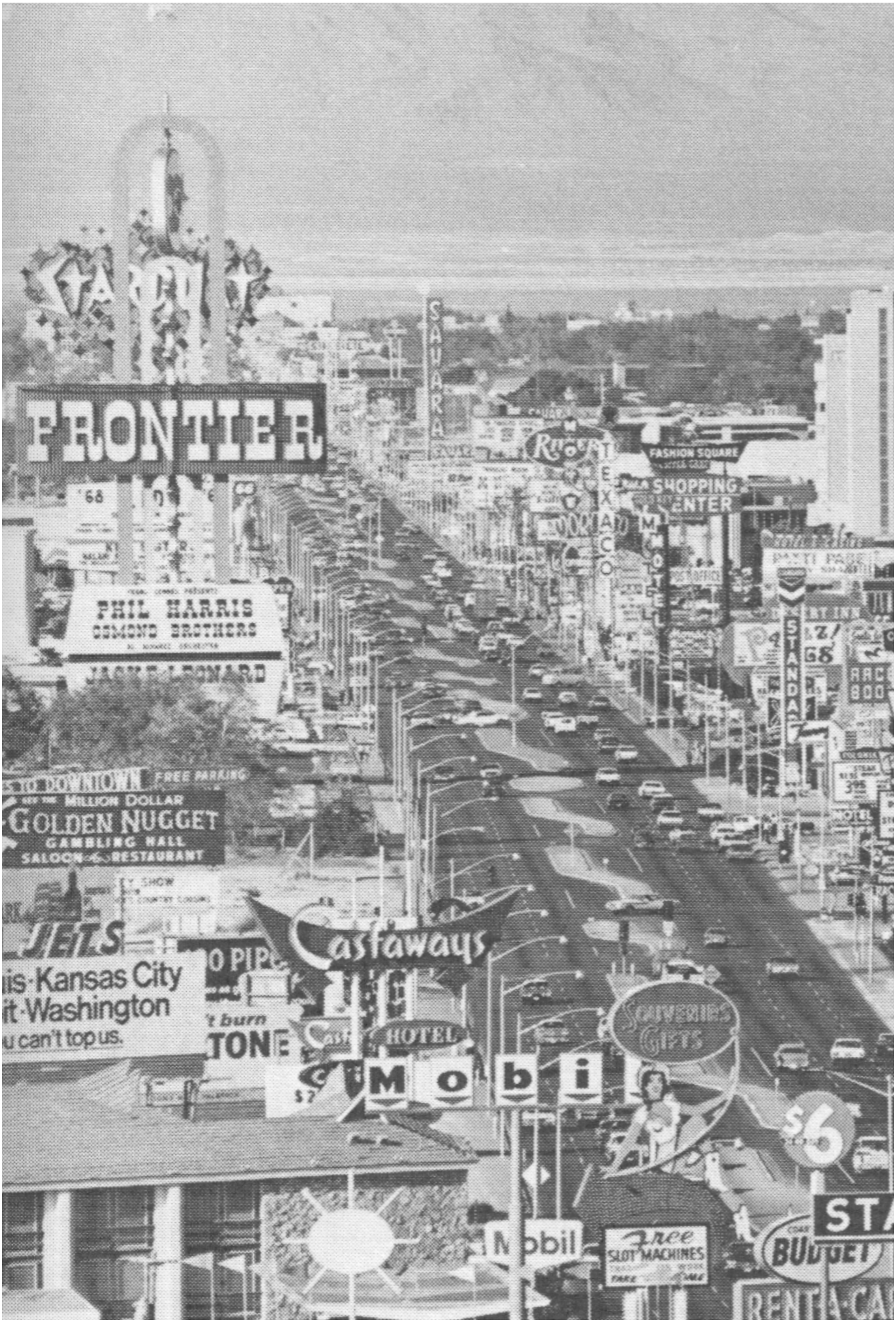
During this time, architects carefully studied the material products of societies: the signposts, the street corners, the roof forms. The studies were intricate and high quality, but what was the architects' relationship to the inhabitants of these places? To the public itself? Conducting thorough documentation and mapping exercises undoubtedly reveals valuable information about the context architects work in. While the significance of this level of knowledge should not be underestimated, the lack of engagement with those who produced this environment and use it on a daily basis leaves a gap in the knowledge of the architect. Instead of understanding the underlying reasons behind why an environment looks the way it does, they focused more on formal qualities, standing a risk of turning the very particular visual language of the Las Vegas Strip into yet another architectural style. The extraction of formal qualities from their socio-cultural context opens it up to superficial appropriation.

Starting in the late 1960s to early 1970s, architecture took on a more social and political turn and can be seen as a natural development from the two previous movements: architects as syndicalists and populists. What these architects had 'learned' from the slums, peripheral communities and Las Vegas had only translated into superficial top-down guidelines, which did little more than impose ready-made solutions on a disenfranchised population. In an article published by the Architectural Forum in 1968, sociologists B. Brolin and J. Zeisel stated that dwellings designed for workers instead of

3 Venturi, Scott-Brown, Learning from Las Vegas, p.3

4 Cullen in What People Want, p. 290

5 Avermaete, The Architect and the Public, p. 54



Las Vegas Strip.

by workers were dehumanizing and degrading despite being technically superior to the alternative, unplanned developments. They argued for a more integrative approach where architect and user work together. This led to a form of advocacy planning, a new development in the architect's position to the public.

The architect-activist saw themselves as representing a disenfranchised community or public in the face of oppression, usually coming from the government or state. Their socially engaged actions highlighted the political nature of architecture: it is a reflection of the conditions that brought it into being and in turn, inevitably impacts the environment it exists in. Whereas architectural aesthetic production is not immediately political in itself, architecture exists in the civic realm and is in this sense political:

"...the political load of architecture is not intrinsic; it is mainly a function of the multifarious relations between the architect and the public." [6]

Whatever mark you make on the environment, it is a conscious engagement with time and society. Architects felt they were in a position to inform and empower people with their knowledge, embedding themselves also into the political network. Public debates and meetings with residents about problems in their living environment characterized architects' interactions with the public at this time. Many found inspiration in the work of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who wrote extensively on the social dimensions of space.

Promoting the publics' position in shaping their environment marked a significant shift in thinking within the profession, but British architect John Turner found another value in this interaction. After studying urban slums in Lima, Peru and working on regenerating and upgrading these areas between 1957-1965, he agreed with the activists' intentions, but also found that this power to impact your environment has an 'existential value'. Published in 1976, Turner's work *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* elaborates on the lessons he learned working in the illegal squatter settlements in Peru. Instead of focusing on them simply as problems that should be eradicated through some form of outside aid, Turner perceived these settlements as self-sufficient, socially inclusive places with potential to evolve from a condition of poverty into functioning suburbs – also economically.

The capacity for Turner to see beyond the immediate visual and material conditions of these environments sets his work apart from the earlier syndicalists and activists. Examining these settlements in a holistic manner – where the material and the social are intrinsically related – allowed Turner to work toward more relevant solutions for the people living there. After successfully applying the principles and methods of working he learned in Peru in counties such as the North America and Britain, Turner aimed to universalize his findings.

The 'laws' that he formulated on housing did not dictate any specific courses of action that would guarantee success though. Instead, they formed more general, even philosophical principles on the production of living environments. His second law essentially states that when producing housing for people, the formal concerns are secondary to ensuring a meaningful environment to its inhabitants. The third and first laws follow a similar line: having the agency to produce your *own* environment makes any deficiencies and imperfections in housing – or any environment – infinitely more tolerable because they are the responsibility of the maker. This responsibility means that the eventual users are given the freedom to contribute to the design, construction or management of their environment as they see necessary. Turner was careful not to imply that all disadvantaged communities should become do-it-yourself builders, but maintains that the control to do so should be in the hands of the people. The 'laws' of Turner avoid simplistic schemes for architecture and spatial production, instead highlighting the psychological importance of engaging directly with our environments.

In Turner's case, the focus was on housing, where inhabitants have an invested interest in improving their immediate living conditions. The do-it-yourself building culture of Chercea is striking in its prevalence throughout the neighborhood, but only in rare cases extends to public space. The improvements are limited to the immediate surroundings of the home such as grapevine trellises over sections of sidewalk and small patches of grass or

6 *Avermaete, The Architect and the Public, p. 61*








Piano & Rice Mobile Workshop, 1979

garden on the opposite side of the road. Whereas Turner's findings on the existential value of do-it-yourself practices in architecture are relevant to Parcul Chercea on a general level, it is important to note that attitudes towards improving private property as opposed to public space vary greatly in Chercea, and Romania. A broad cultural and historical awareness and social sensitivity were necessary when developing methods of engaging people with the forgotten space. Not only was the design place-specific, but also the methods of participation were informed by the context.

Following the developments of the 1960's activist culture, some familiar forms of participation began to take shape, involving an increasingly broad spectrum of actors in various positions of power. Architects organized community meetings and formed a missing link between the people and authorities. By becoming increasingly embedded in social networks, the hierarchies between the architect and those involved in the production of space and architecture started leveling out.

The specific expertise of the architect remained unquestioned during all these transitions, though engagement with the communities was happening. It was increasingly questioned in the 1960's though, particularly by Team Ten member Giancarlo de Carlo. He was a strong advocate of participative design and challenged the established role of the architect. The familiar participative practices of today were further formulated during this time:

"In reality architecture has become too important to be left to architects. A real metamorphosis is necessary to develop new characteristics in the practice of architecture and new behavior patterns in its authors: therefore all barriers between builders and users must be abolished, so that building and using could become two different parts of the same planning process. Therefore the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence." [7]

Modular, flexible, transportable solutions were developed to respond more easily to society's demands at this time. Initiated in 1979, the Urban Regeneration Workshop by Renzo Piano and Peter Rice in Otranto, Italy is an example. It was an experimental form of urban regeneration and engagement with the public in the form of a mobile office that moved on, once the work had been completed. It allowed the architects to engage in dialogue with inhabitants of cities and work closely with local artisans in the regeneration work.

The project was divided into four parts, exhibited in the form of a fold-able cube. Under the section of analysis and diagnostics, the architects conducted meticulous mapping of the existing conditions of old homes and the ancient urban fabric. The second and third parts aimed to educate and inform the public on restoration issues and the project itself. A small library provided material on regulations, funding, resource networks and technical aspects. It was the interface between the residents and the architects. The last section consisted of the construction work itself. By using non-invasive methods, it allowed local residents to remain in their homes during the restoration work.

The project demonstrated a large degree of sensitivity to local context and its inhabitants. The mobile project adapted to each context it worked in, building on what was already there, instead of imposing predetermined solutions or perspectives. This also involved the willingness to humbly listen to the inhabitants. This experimental and mobile system can be seen as a predecessor for many of today's temporary projects. Different forms of work, play and dialogue in or about the space – directly and indirectly – all potentially foster a stake in the space and more broadly, in society.

The shifting of the architect's roles during this time raises questions not only of the profession's responsibility towards the public, but also what falls under the definition of architecture in the first place. The so-called 'Oriental' contexts of GAMMA's studies of the 1950's helped redefine the boundaries of architecture, leading architects like Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Aldo van Eyck, Amos Rapoport and Bernard Rudolfsky to focus on traditional building practices in exotic cultures and their various meanings. Despite falling into exoticism, these studies distilled the values of anonymous architecture, proving that the production of architecture was not exclusive to architects or urban planners. The architects studying vernacular architecture

7 de Carlo in Architecture and Participation, p. 13

Notions of public and private space. Moravian town with arcaded gables and town square.

believed human living practices remain stable throughout time and that those cultures still untouched by modern advances could offer answers to an architecture that had lost perspective of 'basic human needs'. In his work *Architecture without Architects,* architect, engineer and critic Bernard Rudolfsky focuses on the values of architecture produced outside of the profession.

"In orthodox architectural history, the emphasis is on the work of the individual architect; here the accent is on communal enterprise." [8]

By referring to a communal enterprise, Rudolfsky means that vernacular – or anonymous – architecture is inextricable from the particular climatic, cultural and social conditions of a place. Instead of being controlled by one single person or institution, our built environment is inevitably shaped by contingent, but place-specific factors, giving rise to the wildly varied forms seen in anonymous built heritage. The communal thus holds within it more than the network of human relations involved in the building process, it should be seen as a holistic process. In some cultures, private homes resemble embattlements while in others, privately built pergolas and arcades offer shade on public passageways. In Chercea, high fences around properties and neglected parks reveal a stark division between public and private. Cultural, historical and climatic conditions have all played a part in shaping these environments. While being able to read building technologies and aesthetics from these built forms, they also communicate culturally ingrained notions on public and private space.

In his book, *The Meaning of the Built Environment*, Amos Rapoport argues that vernacular architecture cannot be understood without considering meaning. As a culturally determined product, architecture – and more broadly the city – becomes a vehicle for expressing complex meanings, which can be 'read' from surfaces and forms. By using a shared language of sign and symbol, cues to functionality or etiquette can be conveyed to the public non-verbally and instantly. As a result, Rapoport argues, the environment acts as a *mnemonic*: 'It takes the remembering from the person and places the *reminding*

8 *Rudolfsky, Architecture Without Architects, p. 3*

in the environment.'[9] This phenomenon reduces the need to process information in day-to-day life, easing social behavior and producing habitual functions of culture. The success of this depends on the cues being culturally legible though. Systems of communicating meaning can be very subtle, owing to the signs and symbols being widely shared only within a specific context and therefore easily understood. For an outsider on the other hand, some cultural knowledge is necessary to understand the meaning behind built form in non-native contexts.

A characteristic of anonymous architecture is its ability to provide a repertoire of spaces and forms without defining specific functions. In his book *The Structure of the Ordinary,* John Habraken argues that our inhabitation of environments is by nature territorial, not functional, and that the current architectural practice of formulating a specific program prior to the design limits architecture's capacity to adapt to different uses. He points out that vernacular architecture typically 'offered clearly articulated architecture and spatial organization firmly established by the enclosing forms, without strictly defining a specific program for any given uses'.[10] In vernacular architecture, the function or program of particular elements or spaces is not defined by name, but instead by typology, suggesting an openness to appropriation.

Architects realized there can be much to learn from the context specificity, yet openness of non-pedigree architecture. Attempts at extending these values to mainstream architectural practice had varied success. Designs' openness to appropriation was experimented with and by taking a more passive role in a project, architects handed the public the authority to influence their own environment. Participative practices in architecture were initiated by those architects who saw themselves as advocates of certain communities and undertaking in a participative project became a statement: social concerns were clearly given priority over aesthetic ones.

In architecture, models that use both control and freedom often employ a standardized support structure – which comes from within the profession – allowing communal responsibility and individual control to be carried out in the 'inbetween'. Here, the divided responsibility allows for the built environment to become more a reflection of society. As with the vernacular, the dwelling is not viewed as a product but as a process. Users can address their individual and changing needs while respecting the larger structure of communal service and infrastructure. An example where this has been put to practice was a modular, flexible project developed by Habraken's Foundation for Architectural Research (SAR) in the Netherlands. A set of prefabricated modular panels allowed a fixed low-rise frame to be customized to suit the spatial needs of each inhabitant. This basic division between 'support' and 'infill' developed by Habraken has been applied to various housing projects since, but has found less literal applications in public space projects.

The syndicalists, populists, activists and facilitators challenged notions of architecture put forth by modernism. Despite some obvious pitfalls, these represent some of the first honest attempts from within the profession to engage with the contingent world bringing to the foreground a number of issues that remain central to the field today: acknowledge and involve the public, accept architecture's inevitable relationship in time. Recognizing the value of architecture without architects also challenges the traditional definition and expression of architecture.

1.1.2

Public space as laboratory. Active from 1957 to 1972, a group of avant-garde artists known as the Situationists International counteracted the culture of the spectacle in society as a whole. Described at length by Simon Sadler in his work *The Situationist City*, this group made up predominantly of artists challenged what seemed to have become the status quo: using objects to represent the individual with the media as the main means of doing so. The commodified thing – a necklace, a landscape, a person – becomes something more than its functional and material properties. It starts to signify something beyond itself, not only to its individual consumer, but most necessarily to a group of people who play the part of upholding the system of meanings around the object.

Mainstream, modern architecture was derided in these avant-garde circles. Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasília and Le Corbusier's Chandigarh were examples of massive projects transplanted in the middle of nowhere, marking modernism's shift from the rational to the

9 Rapoport, The Meaning of the Built Environment, p. 81

10 Habraken, The Structure of the Ordinary, p. 133

Notions of public and private space. A fortified village in the Caucasus

spectacular, from the revolutionary to the bureaucratic.[11] Based in Paris, the Situationists International used the city streets as a platform to conduct experimental urbanism. They targeted modernism as the main cause behind the disintegration of living, atmospheric urban environments and the commodification of architecture. In his central text to the Situationist Movement, *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord – a key figure of the movement – describes how we have moved from simply being in the world to an existence defined by representation.

"The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having – human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing – all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances." [12]

The previously inanimate thing transforms into an object of desire, becomes a fetishized commodity. The Situationists emphasized that it is less the symptom of this they are counteracting than the cultural phenomenon of applying meaning to an object previously empty of meaning and elevating it. Conventional printed and reported media along with photography and drawing were methods of representation that distance the user from their environment. This form of media plays a significant role in furthering the commodification of architectural objects creating alienation in urban environments. The image of a thing or place means something external to itself. Along with architecture, modernist urban planning methods provided nothing more than a 'technology of separation'[13] to the Situationists.

Old neighborhoods retaining their walking streets, market halls and layers of history were inhabited and carefully studied by the Situationists. They not only provided unregulated pockets of what was seen as authentic life of the working class, but also a respite from the controls of society for the Situationists themselves to experiment.

11 Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 49

12 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, pp. 10-11

13 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, p. 95

They supplied their critique of existing urban planning with conceptual plans, methods of analyzing urban environments and spatial experimentation. They aimed to break away from representations of modernism and urbanity, revealing the abundant and authentic city life underneath. Situationists along with architects like Peter and Alison Smithson conducted street-level studies, moving away from aesthetics-based studies of everyday environments to more 'folk' based studies. The focus was more on patterns of association and identity in small-scale environments and tight-knit communities.

Constant Nieuwenhuys – an architect and central figure in the Situationist movement – suggested the street had once been the locus of social life before the increasing traffic pushed people into pubs and cafés – public establishments that required money to use. The Situationists drew attention to the modern ills of existing urban environments, using the streets, public squares and markets as their laboratories to study the current condition of public life and experiment with socio-spatial uses. Abdelhafid Khatib, appointed by the Situationists to research the exceptional ambiance of Les Halles in Paris in 1958, produced an extensive written report on the area.

"...in some couple of thousand of words bolstered by a sprinkling of Chombart de Lauwe-style maps, complex descriptions of street patterns, and a careful survey of the area's socio-economic diversity, Khatib had not found the source of ambiance after all." [14]

The studies aimed to find concrete answers to why some spaces retain a certain magical ambiance, but the studies – though being extremely detailed – often remained only descriptive. What became clear though, was that an ambiance of a place is not down to only social composition or architectural style and could not be touched through even the most meticulous methods of observation and documentation. In the initial phases of Parcul Chercea, observation of social practices around the neighborhood, mapping and documenting were the only means to learn more about our context. These, like the urban studies of Khatib, nonetheless remained superficial, telling us little about the forces that brought about such material conditions.

The act of walking aimlessly – or drifting as The Situationists called it – holds within it many key principles of their movement. As a method of getting to know the city, drifting was seen as the direct opposite of consuming the city as spectacle. Whereas tourists are driven around cities in fixed itineraries seeing preordained monuments, nothing more than an extension of the museum gallery-the drift remains open, contingent, shifting. Using the city, its streets and their life as raw material, the Situationists produced a manifesto of a new, unitary urbanism.

"The overriding importance that unitary urbanism attaches to social space, is related to the role of the frequent personal contacts which it considers vital for culture, for the mass culture that is to come." [15]

They envisioned the city as a collection of grand 'situations' between which inhabitants would drift. Debord, in his manifesto *The Situationist Thesis on Traffic* argued for a 'unitary urbanism' which aimed to form 'a unitary human milieu in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved'[16]. Criticizing the modernistic proposal to segment cities into separate functional zones, the Situationists also saw the rise of private commuter traffic as contributing to the dissolution of cities and societal alienation.

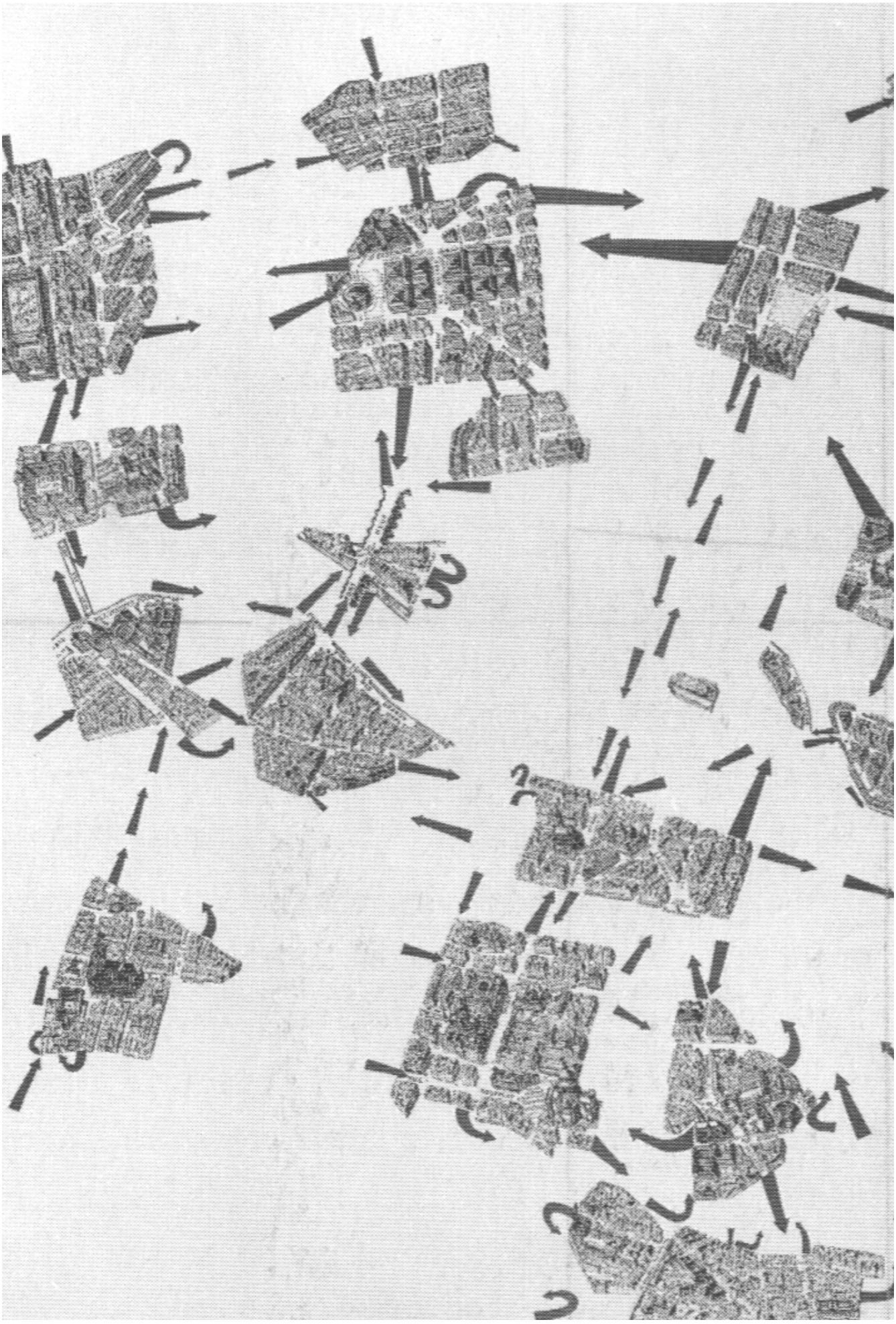
Within this new structure, urban dynamics would no longer be driven by capitalism and bureaucracy, but by participation and an aim to enrich the everyday life of citizens. Unitary urbanism stood as a living critique to the current zoning-based urbanism. Representations of this new concept often took the form of maps. Based on the Situationists' movements in the city, the maps were documentations of areas that were seen as valuable. Existing city maps were dissected, rearranged and altered to communicate a fuller picture of the experience of moving through the city and add information that was not possible in conventional map making. The arrows between the fragments both unify and separate them, their thickness and size indicating the nature of moving from one district to the next.

The Situationists believed there existed a formula for producing situations on demand, which they sought in

14 *Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 70*

15 *Constant in Architectural Positions, p. 241*

16 *Debord in The Situationist City, p. 25*



Debord & Jorn, Guide Psychogéographic de Paris, 1956.

their studies of street life. To try and reproduce this, they staged temporary interventions in public space. They thought of these situations as participative and temporary urban events, a sort of 'gesamtkunstwerk' of ambiance, art, city and society that would lead to new ways of behaving in city environments. One used the formula of a house party. Generic, yet universally recognized and playful, this type of event was easy to understand quickly and facilitated participation with an open-ended approach.

"Architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with. And the experiments conducted with this material will lead to unknown forms." [17]

To the Situationists, the psychological and social conditions of these interventions in the urban environment were more important than form. It remained unclear when the Situationists stopped being initiators and became participants themselves during these events.

In many ways unitary urbanism resembled Alison and Peter Smithson's Cluster City concept, which was also developed as a counter-reaction to modernism:

"What we are after is something more complex, and less geometric. We are more concerned with 'flow' than with 'measure'. We have to create architecture and town planning which, though built form, can make meaningful the change, the growth, the flow, the vitality of the community." [18]

As with the fabricated 'situations' that the Situationists set up in urban environments, the Smithsons aimed to pull people out of their existing isolation through – a much larger scale – urban intervention. Completed in 1969, Robin Hood Gardens estate in London embodies some of the Cluster City principles, but such large scale implementations remain few. The architectural interpretations of this concept translated into expansive structures with no clear center point, but many centers of high activity – each connected to one another. The concept behind Robin Hood Gardens as well as other housing developments by the Smithsons has its roots in the urban street life studies conducted in the 1950s in Bethnal Green – a London borough. Here, the Smithsons developed their first notions of association and identity, which they later attempted to rationalize into built structures. The Smithsons saw the architect as being in a position to offer a choice to the inhabitants of buildings, 'to make places that are meaningfully differentiated; to offer true alternative lifestyles.'[19]

The project in Robin Hood Gardens aimed to respond to these new, more varied social demands after modernism. Arguably, their 'random, 'twig-like' distribution could no doubt be taken as a polemic against wholesale demolition and as an argument in favor of piecemeal development'[20]. Creating meaningful built environments by facilitating interaction, mobility and adaptability were some of the Smithsons' priorities, but attempting to extract specific conditions found in the public spaces of Bethnal Green, replicating them in an entirely different setting led to clinical schemes. Instead of having a unifying effect on communities, Robin Hood Gardens – along with other developments by the Smithsons – often furthered isolation and detachment. As with the modernist plans for a better society, there is a disjunction between ideology, its map-like representations and the eye-level, human scale experience of place.

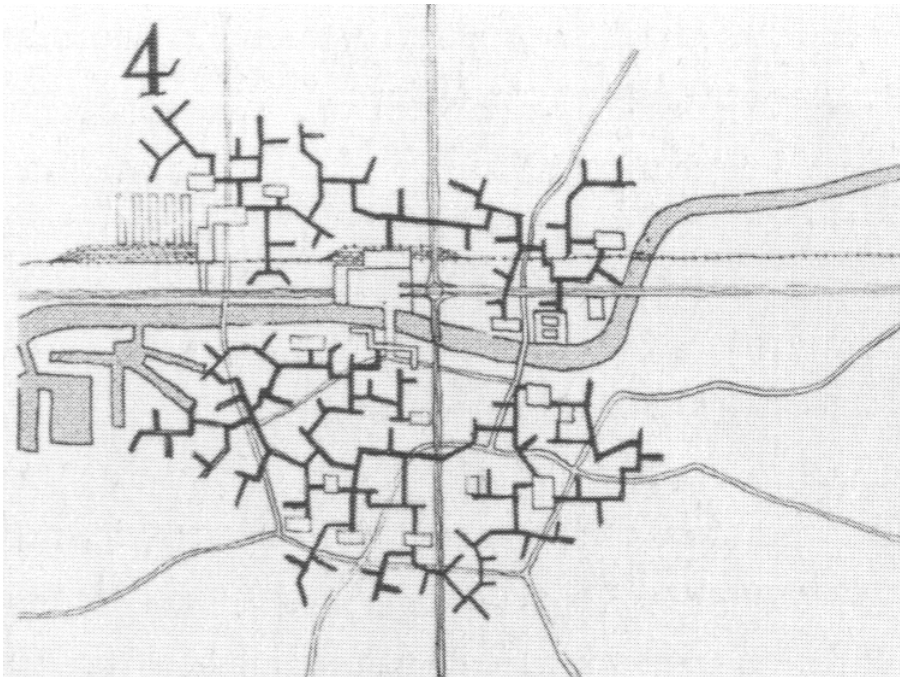
A choice to work directly with the forgotten park space in Chercea in the scale of 1:1 was a conscious attempt to avoid contextually detached or misguided designs. It was necessary to produce drawings to inform the construction process – as a type of universal language – but particularly with the more permanent interventions such as the pyramid, 'mock-ups' were made from string or other impermanent materials to test the visual impact. The now steel football goals were originally made in wood and moved around the park to find an optimal position. In addition to this, informal discussions with the local youth helped us gauge the general opinion on the interventions. In the case of other interventions such as the boulders and trees, a rough placement was drawn at 1:100, but their positions were shifted once their relationships to each other and the park space could be seen at eye-level. As with the Smithsons' proposal, there was a tendency to create abstracted pattern on paper in this project, mistaking representation for reality. To illustrate

17 *Debord in The Situationist City, p. 107*

18 *Alison and Peter Smithson in Architectural Positions, p. 59*

19 *Alison and Peter Smithson in Architectural Positions, p. 62*

20 *Frampton, Modern Architecture, p. 272*



Peter and Alison Smithson, Cluster City 1952

Peter and Alison Smithson. Robin Hood Gardens, completed 1969

this disjunction between eye-level and representation, the repositioned boulders were documented onto the same plan revealing an order that could never have been conceived by designing through plan. Now, their positions followed no recognizable pattern-based logic.

Whatever is being designed to scale and in plan view is seen from a distance and position unattainable to the everyday user. As a result, a majority of the design work in Parcul Chercea actually took place on the site, through 1:1 trials. Two-dimensional drawings only served as a tool for executing the design, instead of a tool for *producing* the design.

1.2

Laying ground for a new social sensitivity.

In the initial counter-reaction to modernism, architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown focused on the mundane forms of American consumerist landscape – billboards, roadsigns, decorated sheds – all essentially working as large-scale packaging. Their work *Learning from Las Vegas* can be seen to reflect the upcoming Post-modern architecture in some ways:

"At its most predetermined, Post-modernism reduces architecture to a condition in which the 'package deal' arranged by the builder/developer determines the carcass and the essential substance of the work, while the architect is reduced to contributing a suitably seductive mask." [21]

While still engaging in context – now through questions on style and form – the focus of the architects fixed onto the facades of buildings, moving away from underlying organizational or socio-cultural aspects that occupied the artists and architects in the 1950s and 1960s counter-reactions. Architectural language continued to be varied, but took shape as a distinct style defined by formal pluralism. Kenneth Frampton in *Modern Architecture* briefly outlines this development in Post-modernism in the US in the 1980s, highlighting the change in the architects' role in the building process. Authority has moved increasingly to the developer and builder, limiting the influence of architects to stylistic questions. This shift in roles has resulted in the apparent lack of reflection in iconic Post-modern architecture and the sometimes hostile privatization of public space. These developments have played a part in aggravating socially-motivated developments within the profession – ways of engaging again with the social and material contexts of cities.

An architecture of ultimate spectacle, Post-modernism seemed to engage little with the human scale or everyday local contexts, instead creating a sense of removal from place and time. Discussing the impacts of 'supermodernity' in his book *Non-Places*, anthropologist Marc Augé describes architecture as being the victim of a 'variegated global influence swamping local color'.[22] Indeed, the singular, huge-scale post modernism coincided with globalization. More subtle, culturally intrinsic details in built form were often overshadowed. The now globally ubiquitous megaprojects give an impression of utopia: aesthetically and functionally detached from their specific locations, they seem to project into the future instead of reflecting on the past. This development in architecture is not only an expression of a time of indulgence and individualism though, but as discovered in the previous chapter, these buildings are more accurately an expression of a system of meanings in society.

1.2.1

Fragmented, indeterminate public space. The media furore and mass tourism surrounding rarefied post modern works of architecture represents another step in the degenerating relationship between society and the built environment. A phenomenon already criticized by the Situationists, it is this practice of the spectacle and commodification that also extends to public urban space today. Entire historical districts have been subjected to a market-led aesthetic homogenization for the tourist's gaze, coupled by breaking apart city structures through over-scaled private development. This has contributed to cities in the West being described through dualisms: interconnected and fragmented, private and public, global and local:

"They [the cities] are confronted with an urban realm which is no longer marked by more or less homogeneous life patterns and spatial practices, but by a pronounced plurality and fragmentation in terms of lifestyles, by tensions arising from the co-existence of multiple

21 *Frampton, Modern Architecture, p. 307*

22 *Augé, Non-Places, p. xv*

Parcul Chercea. The process of design took place on site, at 1:1

and contested identities and by new mechanisms of exclusion and polarisation as the 'local' corollaries of an increasing global interconnectedness and the neo-liberal re-orientation of the economic sphere." [23]

The pluralistic and fragmented city production that began in Post-modernism and has continued to this day departs radically from the development models under the centralized, welfare systems of the twentieth century. Also described as Fordist city planning, the architectural production of urban areas was characterized by mass production and consumption. City plans of this time were defined by highly articulated, yet monotonous public and private zones and little was left indeterminate or ambiguous, with the developer taking a central, paternalistic position in the process. City space has since then developed into complex field accommodating multiple actors with conflicting interests, serving a society that can no longer be defined by uniformity.

Cities have responded to these new developments by moving away from centralized governance and adopting more flexible, entrepreneurial models. Whereas it accommodates for the private interests of diverse actors and steps away from the traditional authoritarian role, this urban policy marks a prioritization of economic over social interests. On the contrary, recent developments have also seen a rise in 'soft' regeneration: the value of culturally-led regeneration has been recognized, providing an alternative to simple physical renewal of urban spaces. This has led to new types of negotiation and bargaining systems between private and public actors and a more horizontal network as opposed to the centralized, authoritarian planning model of modernism.

Despite these positive-sounding developments, in their article, Jacqueline Groth and Eric Corijn warn that these new entrepreneurial approaches to city planning 'homogenise space on consumerist and aestheticised grounds.'[24] Finding themselves part of a global network, cities aim to increase their international competitiveness through image marketing. Particularly city centers have been sanitized, surveillanced and commodified in the hopes of attracting consumers, leading to functional and economic segregation in cities.

In shifting focus from authoritarian to entrepreneurial, the city has lost power to influence the city environment. Conversely, in *The Uses of Disorder*, Richard Sennett adds to this argument in his criticism of cities for failing to respond to new patterns of urban growth flexibly. Instead of acknowledging and learning from unanticipated directions in urban growth, cities stick to their traditional top-down role, investing additional resources into enforcing preordained plans. Sennett states that 'because the massive planning ideal is resistant in its intentions to the idea of history in a city's life, the planners are bound always in the end to be out of control.'[25] Taking such an unresponsive stance, the cities have developed a vacuum of professional leadership. Through the city's efforts to maintain control, the initiative in shaping city spaces has moved into the hands of private actors. As a result of these two factors and possibly more, citizen-led initiatives, grass-roots, independent action have developed from this structural break in governance. Public space in today's cities has become less defined, its uses changing more often, its future less certain and those who shape it increasingly multifarious.

The emergence of 'voids' in the city fabric and their appropriation is a phenomenon resulting from major structural shifts in politics and the economy. For instance, economic and demographic shrinkage have hollowed out parts of the city of Brăila, leaving industrial wastelands – no-man's lands free from the usual controls of the more inhabited areas. Syndicalists, situationists and today's urbanists have all recognized the potential of unregulated and underdeveloped urban spaces. In their text, Groth and Corijn quote architect Stefano Boeri, who characterizes urban residual spaces as having a 'semantic emptiness'[26], their indeterminate character providing room for new appropriations to develop. Another writer, Ignasi de Solà-Morales speaks about *terrain vague*, and its evocative potentials. Void and absence – as the name suggests – holds within it promise and expectation. He recognizes that *terrain vague* also indicates the indeterminate, imprecise and uncertain – all of which can be positive qualities.

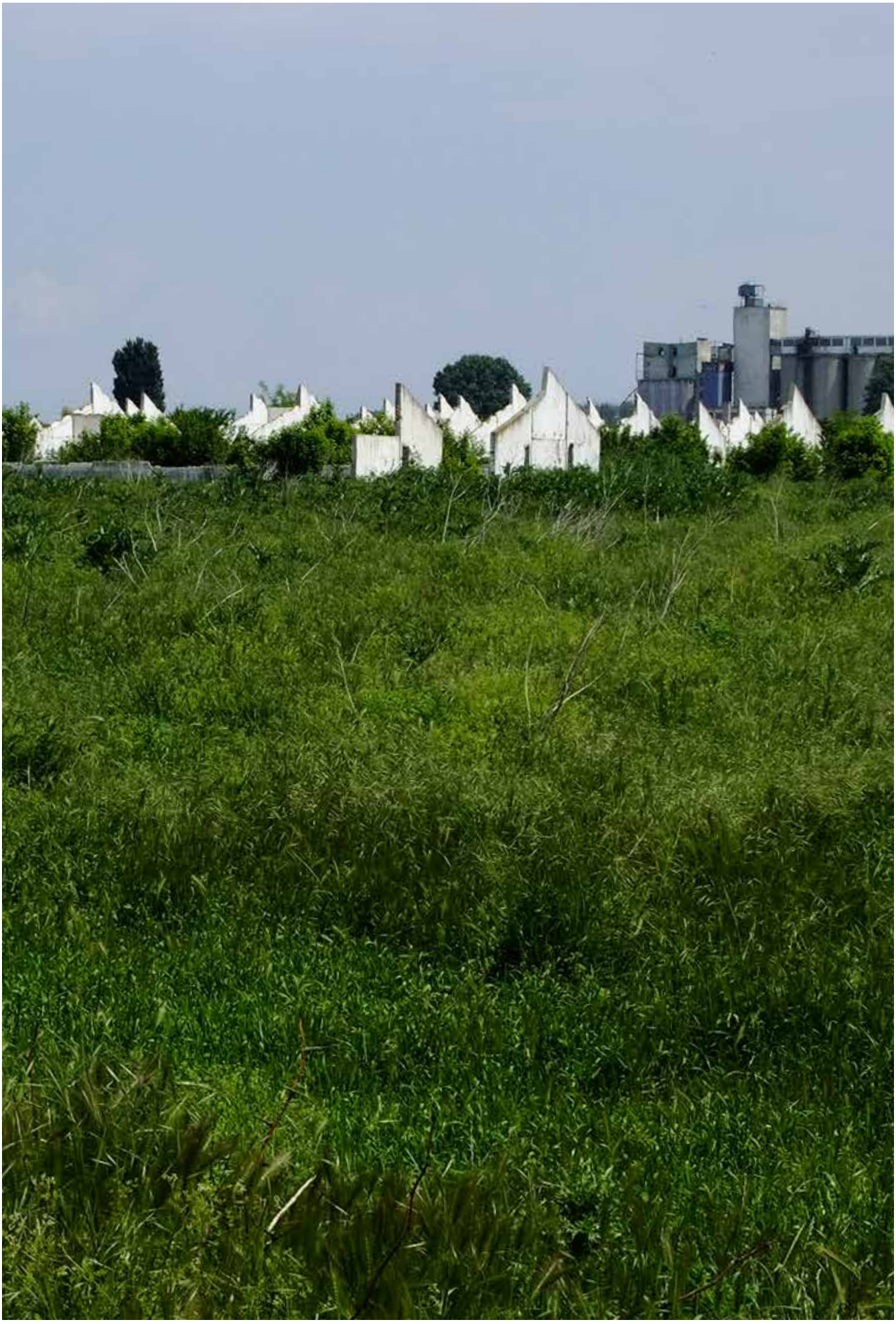
"Furthermore, the dimension of the city as a 'collective historical memory' emerges; residual structures, even

23 *Sassen in Reclaiming Urbanity, p. 504*

24 *Groth and Corijin, Reclaiming Urbanity, p. 505*

25 *Sennett, The Uses of Disorder, p. 100*

26 *Groth & Corijn, Reclaiming Urbanity, p. 506*



Abandoned abattoir, Brăila periphery, 2016.

though stripped of their actual functions, provide the mental base and specific aesthetic qualities for further activities that incorporate their preservation." [27]

The dominance of the past over the present is a quality specific to these places, which have remained largely untouched by the activity and imposed values of the present city. Typical locations of indeterminate spaces include harbor and former industrial areas, peripheries and borders. De Solà-Morales points out that these spaces have also been left behind or overlooked by the economy, often because they are deemed as unsafe or unproductive. Still, these spaces have been romanticized for these very qualities, their strangeness and freedom embraced.

When approaching the neighborhood of Chercea, its edges and the peripheral nature of the neighborhood itself housed a multitude of these indeterminate spaces. It was difficult to avoid the tendency to romanticize the communist industrial ruins, the unexplainable fragments of infrastructure or picturesquely overgrown garbage dumps. To avoid superficial interpretation and commodification of these landscapes, it was essential to understand the social, political, cultural and economic conditions that shaped them.

The increasing appetite for these vague spaces speaks of a lack of something that the spectacles of shopping malls and iconic architecture cannot offer. In their early explorations by drifting and mapping, the Situationists sought out these same characteristics of spontaneity and freedom that gave rise to the 'moments' they believed make up lived – and not represented – city life. As public space becomes increasingly privatized and regulated, these small pockets within the city have provided havens for experimentation to a wide range of architectural and artists' collectives. Today, notions of public space are reflected in these spaces, specifically in Western European cities such as Berlin or London. Similar voids in the urban fabric in Romania are for the most part left to disintegrate. Despite their 'empty' nature, new relationships between city space and the public are forged here, making these indeterminate spaces in Western European cities socially valuable.

"Thus, these sites reappropriated for cultural and other uses also typify the new importance and meaning of socially constructed space in the contemporary city as the locus where 'values, identities and systems of reference are confronted with each other'" [28]

These sites act as democratic spaces where different notions of urbanity clash. De Solà-Morales raises the difficult topic of architects' and architecture's relationship with indeterminacy though. Historically, architecture has served as an 'instrument of organization, of rationalization, of productive efficiency'[29] essentially filling voids with buildings, replacing uncertainty with statement. Can architecture be practiced in these indeterminate spaces without turning into an aggressive instrument of power imposing abstract ideologies? This question implies architecture exists in a vacuum, completely separate from the civic realm. A way to break out of this false isolation, de Solà-Morales argues, is through attention to continuity. Paying attention to 'the flows, the energies, the rhythms established by the passing of time and the loss of limits'[30] the architect not only breaks down this false isolation but also anchors themselves and their work into society.

Avermaete speaks of a tabula rasa condition of the colonial territories of North Africa, which attracted architect-activists to realize their ideas in the 1950s. These architects may not differ too much from those of today, finding an irresistible pull to the wildscapes, peripheries and industrial sites of shrinking, expanding or fragmented cities. Instead of being a marginal occupation of a subculture of artists and activists though, also conventional architects and planners of today are faced with the challenge of working in these new indeterminate conditions. Unlike those who sought out exotic contexts in order to question professional boundaries, it is not necessary to venture far to find these indeterminate territories today. Often found just around the corner, in the centers of cities or neighborhoods, these peripheral spaces are not determined by their geographical marginality as much as their functional uncertainty, becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

27 Groth and Corijn, Reclaiming Urbanity, p. 521

28 Lefebvre in Reclaiming Urbanity, p. 506

29 de Solà-Morales in Anyplace, p. 122

30 de Solà-Morales in Anyplace, p. 123

unused railway tracks separating Chercea from Brăila, 2016.

1.2.3

Working with indeterminacy. Gaps have opened up in planning processes and the roles of those involved in the production of space need to be rethought. A new sensitivity to the material, social and existential potentials these spaces is necessary in order to provide cities that 'breathe' and accommodate difference. In the OASE editorial *Productive Uncertainty: Indeterminacy in Spatial Design, Planning and Management*, the role of the designer in relation to indeterminacy is broken down into three rough categories. The anticipation of uncertainty by accommodating future changes through design, productive uncertainty where the outcome is left open, and supporting uncertainty in development by redefining the roles of actors in spatial development and management. John Habraken, in an interview in the above mentioned OASE editorial, discusses indeterminacy through the notions of 'support' and 'infill' – concepts that have come to form the backbone of multiple socially engaged projects.

"(...) wherever you are working you are always busy working within something that has already been made by someone else, and what you make becomes a context for someone else." [31]

Thinking in this way about building on existing structures or building structures that can be built on by others in the future, Habraken underlines the importance of time in architecture. A designer, he says, does not need to establish an end scenario, it is instead crucial to define what is important in the project, and to clearly stand by these priorities. This forms the 'frame' of the project. This allows the architect to let go of an ideology-driven need for complete control – a way of thinking that was especially apparent during modernism. Habraken cites old cities as an example where typology meets individual expression. Here, a certain formal framework is established, allowing individual expression to happen within – for instance general dimensions and roof shape is predetermined, but inhabitants have full control of the facades. Essentially, he argues that when introducing one level, it immediately creates the conditions for the next level to form in response to it. A simplified example of this could be an urban plan providing a structure for individual houses which in turn provide the conditions for an interior architect to work and finally the person to inhabit.

Where the levels are set is culturally determined though, and in some places, more space exists for individual expression. In vernacular architecture, instead of an architect establishing a framework, it is often climatic or cultural factors lending the buildings their structured yet differentiated appearance. These levels and with them cultural values can be read from vernacular and historical buildings along with today's architecture.

He points out that there is an increased interest in rethinking methodology within the field. There is a misconception that methodology necessarily dictates step by step an architect's process. It is instead about recognizing themes, typologies and patterns, things that act as the supports of the communal. The supports, the communal is what architects and planners should take responsibility for in a design.

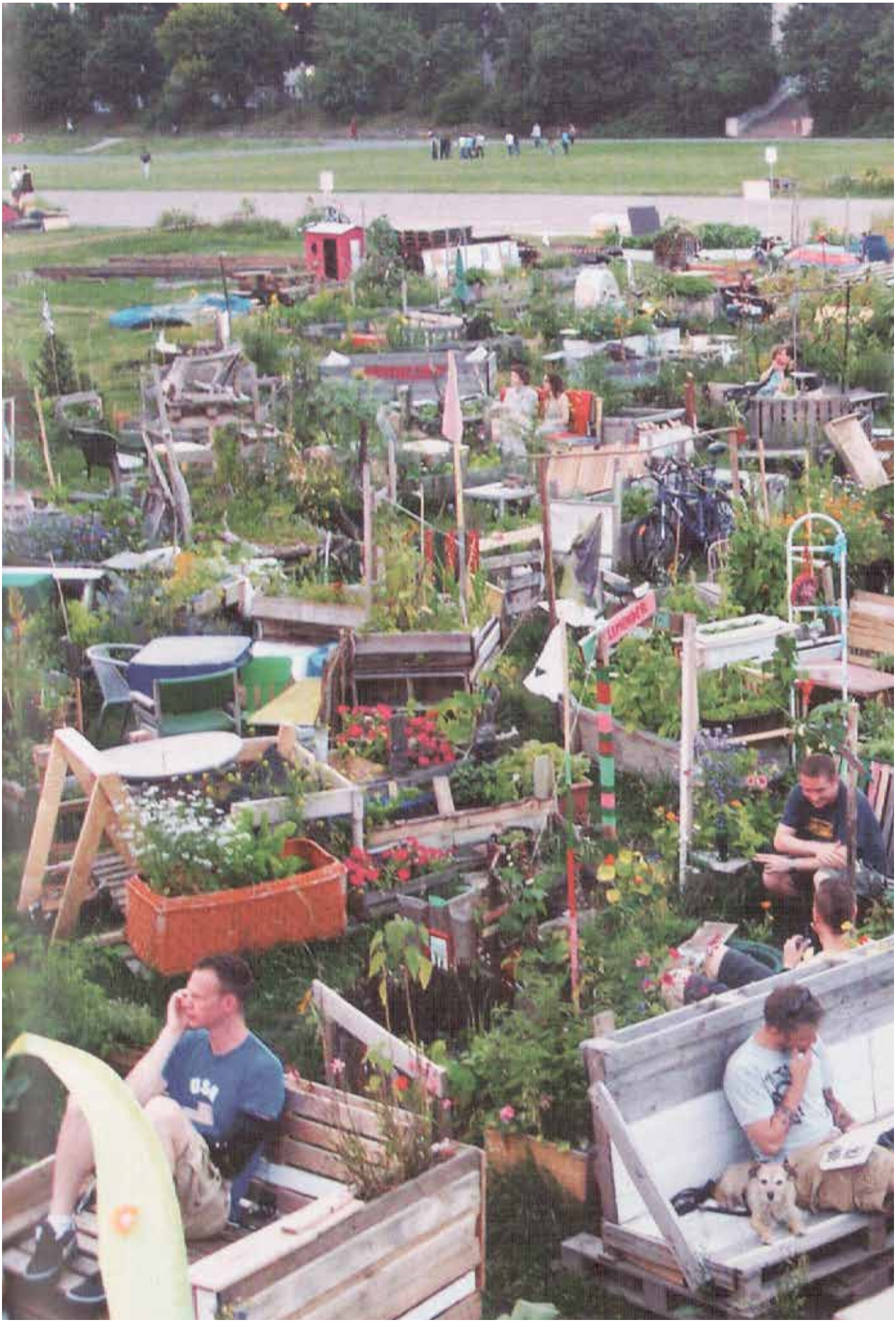
"Each act of settlement relies on articulated form to stimulate further interpretation. Given the increasing fluidity and variety of contemporary life, the functionalist approach may prove to be a short-lived phenomenon. Inhabitation remains fundamentally territorial, and architecture may return to the articulation of space that is open to acts of inhabitation." [32]

Habraken himself did not practice architecture, instead choosing to leave his theory open to appropriation by others. How have some of these notions been translated into architecture? More literal interpretations of the 'support' and 'infill' concept have been applied to the housing schemes developed under SAR, but examples of temporary architecture in urban settings also display characteristics of Habraken's theory. For its qualities of adaptability, cost and time effectiveness, temporary architecture has proved to be a versatile tool in inhabiting the indeterminate urban territories of today. By providing physical structures in often mundane or identity-less stretches of urban fabric, temporary interventions stand as something tangible through which a sense of place and community can be developed.

Strict regulations and rapidly changing spatial contexts in cities have led to a particular architectural language of

31 Habraken in OASE 85, p. 11

32 Habraken, Structure of the Ordinary, p. 135



Temporary urbanism, Tempelhofer Feld, Berlin.

temporary architecture. Low-cost or salvaged materials, mobile nature and temporary existence make the projects quick to set up, adapt to change and dismantle. Like in more permanent architecture, here the choice of material and mode of construction also communicate things about the context. The focus on social and material sustainability can signify material scarcity or some form of social disadvantage. At the core of many temporary urbanism projects are notions of marginality and democratic use of public space. Phenomena such as the sharing economy, urban farming, inclusivity, commons, escapism, new identity through reuse of space are all tackled in temporary urbanism projects and are not mutually exclusive. In various ways, these projects explore participative practices, continuing to challenge the architect's omnipotent role.

On a broader scale, cities have also come to realize the value of indeterminate spaces and their temporary uses in shaping the identity of the city. In the article *Temporary Uses as Means of Experimental Urban Planning* Sampo Ruoppila and Panu Lehtovuori speak about development-orientation in urban planning, using temporary architecture as a means to explore potentials of a space. Underused spaces and their 'saviors' have been described by a variety of names: 'casco', 'urban fallows', 'urban pioneers', invoking strong associations of retrieving something that is in short supply. In Berlin, Amsterdam and Helsinki for example, temporary uses have been used strategically to reveal latent potentials of underused spaces and more strategically to 'increase their attractiveness as yet-unbuilt land'[33]. The article found that cities in Germany, the US and Finland have reacted to this trend, in some cases even put in place a recognized planning classification, forming a category between momentary events and permanent (re)development. It is important to note that temporary architecture in these cases is seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Many critics of this organized harvesting of potential have raised concerns of temporary urbanism creating a smokescreen to the public, pretending to be something communal while actually being just a cheap 'warm-up act' to high-end developments that will overrun the land in the future anyway. Also by appropriating and instrumentalizing identity on such a systematic scale, the productive indeterminacy is robbed of its original power.

1.2.3

A temporary project in London, the Southwark Lido is taken as a classic example of a temporary, socially motivated appropriation of urban space. The project was a temporary spatial installation, functioning for one month on a small, neglected strip of land between a bridge and housing. Working as a design collective, the French group Exyzt and filmmaker Sara Muzio began by organizing participative workshops and events with local user groups to inform the design. The design was a public lido in the spirit of Roman baths and Turkish hammams – spaces that traditionally functioned as ritual cleansing and social meeting points for the surrounding community. Also in the tradition of these historical spaces, the architectural collective hoped this centrally-located interpretation of a public bath would become a space of political discussion for both the locals and the visitors of the simultaneously ongoing London Festival of Architecture.

"The Southwark Lido expresses EXYZT's strategy of urban renewal, based on the idea that a community of users actively creating and inhabiting their urban environment is key to generating a vibrant city." [34]

According to member Dimitri Messu, the group defines their work through unconventional, temporary approaches to activating public space. Working often with concrete 'micro-actions' in everyday environments, the designers experiment with adaptability and spontaneity, creating social 'situations' and 'open' designs. All of the above deal with the notion of indeterminacy, which the group sees as a valuable resource in the space itself and during the production of the space. Actions on a site are more like concrete, 1:1 inquiries, and one action may inform the next or be improved as part of a continuous process. These action-studies are seen by the group to serve multiple functions: they can provide a tangible tool for urban policy development, provide new conditions for appropriation by the community or alternatively generate dialogue and synergies between various actors with invested interest in the space. Ultimately, Exyzt's multidisciplinary group wishes to anchor the on-site actions into a process of contextually and socially-engaged development. Their projects are seen as just one phase in a longer continuum

33 Ruoppila, Lehtovuori, Temporary Uses as a Means of Experimental Urban Planning, p. 33

34 http://www.exyzt.org/southwark-lido/ (accessed 5.4.17)

Southwark Lido, London.

of development. Process oriented thinking leads to a direct engagement with time, which Messu argues is essential:

"When there is time there is indeterminacy. Indeterminacy needs room to exist, whereas determinacy leads from one point to the next, in a straight line." [35]

As seen, indeterminacy can exist in multiple phases of a project, but how was the Southwark lido project engaged with it? Regarding the design, the extent that the collective allowed interactions with the users or the surroundings themselves to determine the actual design is unclear from the available resources, including their own web page. They did, however take a participative and communal approach in building the lido, citing the practice of 'building together' as a central theme in this project.

While it was unclear how the project specifically engaged with the local community in its realization, the group is more explicit about the project's position in the broader context of London. The project engages specifically with the productive indeterminacy of space in an otherwise densely populated urban context. The collective viewed the temporary appropriation of the space as part of a longer continuum in the spatial development of 'the other side of the Thames'. This was a social gesture sitting among more established cultural and business-led institutions such as the Tate Modern and Renzo Piano's high-end office tower development The Shard. Regarding the democratic use of urban space, the group takes a strong position on working with impermanent structures, to avoid promoting the appropriation of spaces by any single user group. The lido's impermanence drew attention to the established and even stagnant nature of its surroundings, including the plot of land it was built on.

Despite its informal aesthetic, the project was curated by The Architecture Foundation for the London Festival of Architecture in 2008, anchoring it firmly into established, conventional bodies influencing urban development in cities. The neglected land was leased to Exyzt by Solid Space – an independent developer who by their own words, 'create bespoke, sensitive and well-designed projects that unlock the potential of small backland gap sites that others' may overlook'[36].

In their quest to break deterministic modes of spatial production, Exyzt's tactics of achieving more socially engaged public space are different from those of the early architects and artists questioning modernism's determinism. Choosing to work with such established actors, they are far from the subversive, underground world of the Situationists International, activists and facilitators who defined themselves in opposition to the 'establishment'. For its participatory nature and DIY aesthetic, the Southwark Lido was a controlled and predetermined urban action, conducted in collaboration with a network of established institutions including a developer, festival and association.

The architect's relationship with those in power is not necessarily a bad thing, it might not undercut the public and inclusive nature of the project. But there is something more tricky in this project, which in my opinion reflects in the level of engagement more than the network involved in producing the space. As a French group that works for the most part in foreign contexts, they have been criticized for a myopic approach to social engagement and reactivating underused space. In the comments section on a Dezeen article site visitor PeterG. writes:

"There is no way this project could engage with the people who live close by as the architects involved see the locals as people needing help, that for 17 days they will be there to help the locals. These so called radical thinking architects are just 'French playboys' (their own words) practicing / rehearsing to behave like the developers they will soon become." [37]

The commenter continues to criticize the group for their lack of engagement with the real issues in the city – including a multitude of existing, crumbling lidos, their naive yet patronizing concept of democratic architecture, the high price of a project that is seemingly low cost and just the general functionality as a lido, which the visitor essentially called a paddling pool. Dimitri Messu remarked on the importance of time in fostering productive indeterminacy. In this case it was a number of factors that incited the ire of some Londoners – one of which included the short presence of the architects and the

35 *Messu in OASE 85, p. 118*

36 *http://solidspace.co.uk/about-us/ (accessed 5.4.17)*

37 *https://www.dezeen.com/2008/07/18/southwark-lido-by-exyzt-and-sara-muzio/ (accessed 5.4.17)*

expectation of some lasting effect on the community. The project's temporariness coupled by a declaration of a socially motivated agenda certainly seems superficial and paradoxical. The fact that the project was also initiated by 'outsiders' as part of a large-scale festival threw into question the group's capacity to genuinely 'help' the community living there in any specific way. Marc Augé offers a critical perspective on architecture's relationship with context, shedding some light on the project's social shortcomings:

"Leading architects have become international stars, and when a town aspires to feature in the world network it commissions one of them to produce an edifice that will stand as a monument, a testimony proving its presence in the world (...)." [38]

In his text, Augé refers to post modern 'non-places' that lack identity and rootedness in place, but the same phenomenon could be argued to exist in any major architectural trend – including the current temporary urbanism. Once an architectural language begins to signify things beyond itself, it becomes open to appropriation. Augé's comment can therefore be seen as a criticism on iconic megaprojects or conversely smaller, temporary 'urban actions'. Undeniably, there has recently been an explosion of a certain architectural language consisting of pallets and scaffolding in cities around the globe. Originally a specific response to contexts of material scarcity and temporal limitations, these structures still communicate notions of reuse, affordability and the experimental. The architectural language functioning as representation raises questions on the context specificity – the social nature of the project.

By commissioning this project by an already recognized group, the city of London and the London Festival of Architecture use architecture to embed themselves into a global network that recognizes this architectural language and its meanings. Today and also in the past, cities organize biennales or festivals to compete against one another for international visibility. Being highly curated, the Southwark lido becomes part of the broader cultural and image-branding agenda of the festival and the city. The prestige and identity of the Southwark lido can be seen to have formed within this global framework, overshadowing the significance of the local. Polemically it could be concluded that Exyzt, the Southwark lido and its every visitor become part of an arranged spectacle, a tool to further the international identity of London while veiling itself in a superficial concern for 'authentic' local culture. Similarly to the Situationists International, the group aims to generate unexpected moments in urban environments, but the network they embed themselves in also makes them part of an arranged, commodified spectacle.

"Architecture is here no more than a means, as the bar, the sauna and sundeck are. The objective is to create "space" and "place"; a real place where visitors, neighbours, politicians and artists mingle, meet, enjoy, talk, discuss and create – by doing so – public space again." [39]

By employing such a universal language and therefore communicating a certain set of values, it is possible to create a sense of context specific 'place'? Is this just another deterministic and simplistic vision of how people should engage with their surroundings? What type of indeterminacy is at play here? Does the project really foster productive indeterminacy or does it exist as part of a now homogeneous category of temporary urbanism, another type of identity-less non-place?

In the above, project contributers Dimitri Messu and Véronique Patteeuw reflect on the values of temporary urbanism and its position in fostering public life. In the same vein as the Situationist International, they argue that temporary spaces can create unexpected encounters and opportunities – moments that often lack in our controlled and fragmented public spaces today. Unexpected spaces can lead to unexpected encounters and behaviors by drawing people out of their ordinary environments. Another value is the experimental nature of these installations. They search for the right way to respond to users' multifarious needs.

Apart from simply enlivening a neglected space, the project's brief existence generated public discussion about the value of temporary architecture and the architect's roles. The temporary intervention raised questions on

38 Augé, Non-Places, p. xvi

39 https://southwarklido.wordpress.com/changing-the-settings-changing-politics/ (accessed 5.4.17)

the roles of the architect in the production of space and engagement with social concerns. Though physically temporary, the dialogue stemming from this intervention can be seen as the real, more permanent value.

1.3

Engaged architecture, so far.

While the various examples outlined in part one represent only a small portion of similar developments in architecture, they illustrate a spectrum of engagement with context. So how has architectural practice engaged with context so far?

The focus of the syndicalists and populists in the 1950s on exotic and vernacular contexts may now seem superficial architecturally and naive in their humanitarian aims, but they stand for an important development in architectural methodology. By moving outside of the design office onto the field, they lessened the hierarchy between architect and the citizen, beginning a slow, but decisive shift in the power balance between 'expert' architect and 'non-expert' citizen. By consciously immersing themselves in unfamiliar surroundings or finding the value in structures produced without architects, shortcomings in architectural practice became apparent, leading to reflection on the roles and responsibilities of the architect.

As the focus turned increasingly toward vernacular architecture and its values, architects – including those involved in the counter-reaction to modernism – traveled to exotic countries to study indigenous cultures and historical cities in an attempt to rid themselves of Western perspectives that were then perceived as stagnant, outdated. Architects' experiences of immersion in foreign contexts helped further develop methodologies in building practice and site analysis. Vernacular buildings seemed to meet the needs of its users, withstand local climates and remain relevant throughout time all at once. *What could Western architects learn from vernacular architecture?* The vernacular environments addressed universal needs while simultaneously remaining culture and place-specific. In the case of Parcul Chercea, living in the neighborhood for an extended period of time allowed us to understand our context as a whole: building practices, material cycles, social structures and viewpoints of the inhabitants all make up a specific sense of place. The choice to live among the public we were designing for was deliberate, forming a part of a contextually engaged methodology.

Equally importantly, by working so closely in specific contexts, the early syndicalists, populists, activists and facilitators revealed shortcomings in Western architectural practice. The sweeping application of universal principles was openly questioned. In her critical work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* published in 1961, Jane Jacobs reminds us of the dangers of engaging with complex contexts using oversimplified tools:

"By now, these orthodox ideas are part of our folklore. They harm us because we take them for granted." [40]

Though Jacob's criticism targets modernist city planning in its method of applying these universal principles to diverse contexts, blindness to the needs of the user may also be the result of never reflecting on the architect's own, native architectural culture. Reflecting back on the process of Parcul Chercea, the first step to producing a relevant design for those living in the neighborhood was to question our own approaches in architecture.

After the first wave of critical practice of the 1950s, the focus shifted beyond the visual and immediate humanitarian aspects of the vernacular and exotic contexts. Architects as facilitators and activists began searching for ways to design architecture that was meaningful and relevant to its users. Architects such as Turner highlighted the inseparable nature of the social and the material in our built environments in his context studies and designs. Turner also highlighted the existential and psychological importance of having a stake in your environment. For the activists and facilitators, fostering a sense of ownership was equally important to the visual and functional outcome, the architects realizing the existential importance of being able to make an impact on society. During the 1960s and 1970s, participative practices such as community and town hall meetings and collective building practices began to develop. These alternative modes of architectural production formed the basis for the participative building practices we see today.

Methods of engaging with the inhabitants of Chercea

40 Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, p. 16

were broad during the project, ranging from organized workshops to spontaneous participation that combined play and work. One-on-one, informal discussions with the immediate neighbors of the park also formed an unexpected channel of communication, also leading to a physical intervention on the site. In the project, participation and engagement methods responded to the particular culture of the place. Employing otherwise successful and commonly used strategies of engagement such as arranged community meetings would not have been as successful in this context. In Brăila, the culture of citizen participation in improving public community spaces is still developing. The reasons for this will be outlined in chapter two, which looks more closely at the socio-spatial impact of Communism in Romania. The complex relationship of the inhabitants to their public space necessitated the development of new forms of engagement, involvement that had existential value to the public specifically in Chercea.

An interest in the everyday, vernacular or exotic environments coupled with participative practices, allowed for a 'letting go' of aesthetic control in architecture. Contingent factors such as people's personal tastes, climate and socio-cultural practices were now allowed to inform and impact architectural design. This represented changes in attitude toward indeterminacy among architects. Following this period change in the 1950s to 1970s, indeterminacy gained multiple forms, continuing to be viewed in a primarily positive light.

Indeterminate spaces have been written about and studied by architects such as de Solà-Morales, but also by The Situationists International, who recognized their value, but being unable to precisely define it. Pieces of land and fragments of street had a 'semantic emptiness' or 'atmosphere', offering a welcome respite from the control and development of rapidly urbanizing areas. Though demographically shrinking instead of growing, Brăila is full of these 'voids', both at the peripheries and at the center. The forgotten park stands as a classic example of this type of space: at a point with high pedestrian traffic, yet remaining unused. The strategic location of the space combined with an indeterminate current function seemed an inviting opportunity to try and reveal the potentials of the space. As with Parcul Chercea, this type of spatial indeterminacy gave rise to new types of architecture that aimed to discover the potentials and make these spaces productive again. Temporary architecture became a flexible tool to draw attention to the potentials of these various indeterminate spaces. In Parcul Chercea, the first intervention was temporary and represented an attempt to reveal hidden potentials of the forgotten park.

Recognizing indeterminacy as a productive force was a broad-ranging development that contributed to concrete architectural solutions and typologies. Habraken underlined the adaptability of typological architecture as opposed to architecture with a prescribed, single function, developing this further into a support and infill structure for housing. These designs invited appropriation by the users, providing only the essentials, leaving the rest open to interpretation. In Parcul Chercea, the forms and architectural language of some interventions are intentionally 'vague' – or typological as Habraken described it. This functional openness facilitates future appropriation, accommodating uses architects are not always able to foresee.

Developing methods of social engagement requires an in-depth knowledge of the people being designed for, their attitudes towards volunteer work, what they view as meaningful in their surroundings. Throughout the course of the project in Chercea, various modes of social engagement were tested, each responding to a different cue in the social and material context. What can be learned from the examples discussed in the first chapter is the necessity to listen to context. The methods of doing so are extremely varied, but the end result is what counts: to provide meaningful architecture to the users.

ARCHITECTURES OF ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

architects' roles, architecture's boundaries

counter-reaction to modernism | *developing new methodologies* | *more power ceded to architecture's public* | *value of vernacular architecture* | *material and social inseparable*

syndicalists (GAMMA)

involvement in social issues

living in exotic contexts

living in Chercea

populists (Venturi, Cullen)

challenge expertise of architect

mapping everyday environments

documenting, mapping

choice of site

activists, facilitators (Turner, de Carlo)

architecture is political

existential value in self-building

storytelling

participation

Rudolfsky

vernacular architecture

multiple factors shape architecture

participation

Rapoport

meaning in the built environment

architecture as a mnemonic

football goals

memory mural

Habraken

design by typology, not function

design for appropriation

'support' & 'infill'

pyramid

boulders

public space as laboratory

the Situationists International

criticized spectacle & commodification

'drifting', mapping, spontaneity

documenting, mapping

living in Chercea

participation

football goals

the Smithsons

urban street-life studies

prioritized interaction, mobility, adaptability

documenting, mapping

participation

boulders

de Certeau

walking diminishes hierarchies

ways of understanding context fragmented

living in Chercea

documenting, mapping

fragmented, indeterminate public space

Augè

non-places lacking identity and meaning

choice of site
Brăila

Groth & Corijn, Sennett

developers position of power in cities

voids in city fabric

choice of site
Chercea

de Solà Morales

evocative potentials of 'terrain vague'

attention to temporal continuity

choice of site
Chercea

working with indeterminacy

Habraken

'support' & 'infill'

establishing a frame of control in the design

importance of time in architecture

memory mural
pyramid
participation

Ruoppila & Lehtovuori

temporary urbanism

development orientation in urban planning

revealing latent potentials of underused land

participation
football goals

Exyzt

example project

meaningful participation

developing methods of involving the public

Bishop

collaborative practices

control vs. freedom in participation

storytelling
participation
football goals

de Carlo

questions architects' expertise

iterative, process planning model

final design part of continuum

Illich

education through participation

learning outside of the classroom

representation vs reality

Lynch

2. ROMANIA: RE-ENGAGING ARCHITECTURE

In Romania, shifting ideological eras alternately put the Church, the state or the corporation in a position of power to impact conceived space. [1]

At a glance it seems like a single wave of trendy urbanism is sweeping throughout Europe, from East to West. Today, cultural and commercial activities seem to abound in Bucharest: the city's previously closed inner court yards have come to life with temporary festivals, café/ restaurants/bars, annual design fairs, film festivals. Programs and projects aimed at involving students in the rehabilitation of neglected spaces or regions are now regularly held at the faculty of architecture at the university in Bucharest. 'Maker spaces' for creative collaboration have sprung up in old industrial districts and offices working with urban contexts have made insightful studies on specific urban phenomena and engaged with city space through temporary interventions.

Casual conversations with those who have lived in Bucharest reveal that these developments are very recent: temporary urban activations and socially engaged projects have multiplied the last five years. Apart from a shared visual language, it becomes clear that the motives behind the socially-oriented architecture movement in Romania are different to those in Western Europe.

2.1

The Impact of Communism.

On the ninth Congress of the Romanian Communist Party of July 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu was appointed the new General Secretary of Romania. At the beginning, the newly appointed leader seemed dynamic and future-oriented. Ceausescu gained popularity from small liberal actions that seemed optimistic after the strict Stalinist rule of his predecessor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Ceausescu's initial socio-economic transformations were superficial and populist though. The wellbeing of households was measured in refrigerators, TV sets and washing machines.[2] The following sections discuss how architecture was appropriated by the state to exercise social and political control. The changes implemented by the communist regime were centralized, instead of fragmented and market-led, with a strong social and ideological base. The impacts were just as much spatial as they were societal, the two becoming inseparable.

2.1.1

Establishing control: the disappearance of a profession. To understand the socio-spatial impacts of Communism, it is necessary to look briefly at the architectural and urban nature of cities before 1947 – the year communist rule became official in Romania. During the interwar period – between 1918 and 1929 – modernism, and the enthusiasm of the new reached Romania. Architects who had traveled to Central European capitals during the interwar period viewed even the largest Romanian cities as little more than sizeable villages, lacking the necessary features to be truly urban. A richer architectural language began to appear in Romanian urban areas during this time:

"That period was mainly characterised by two major expressive tendencies – modernism and the search for a national style, theoretically opposed, yet unusually liable to conciliation. The low building density of traditional Romanian cities (in the process of modernisation) offered sufficient space for both tendencies to develop, hence softening the ideological contradictions." [3]

Between the two World Wars, Bucharest housing areas were developed on the garden city model: in downtown areas like Moşilor, this structure is still visible in sections. Romanian eclectic and national romantic style family villas from the early 1900s and cubist homes from the 1930s follow intricate, curving streets. Slightly set back from the street, a layer of foliage and light, low fences create an intermediate space between the sidewalk and the front doors of the homes.

At the start of Communism, this garden city model of urban development was happily abandoned by architects – irrespective of their relationship to the communist establishment. Initially, the communist regime and its planning principles reflected those of modernism and offered architects the illusory chance to transform Romanian cities closer to their esteemed European neighbors. The Athens Charter that came out in 1943 fueled the architects' sentiments, stating clearly its opposition to the types of traditional urban form found in

1 *Zatric, Urban Revolution Now, p. 227*

2 *Sandqvist, Dacia 1300: My Generation, p. 12*

3 *Zahariade, Dacia 1300: My Generation, p. 56*

Romanian cities. Despite already being under communist rule, the radical transition in style was less about furthering communist ideals through architecture than a new vision for city development. Architecture had not yet become a symbol for an oppressive ideology.

Ana Maria Zahariade – an architect and professor who studied and worked during and after the communist regime – explains that there was an illusion of alignment with the West at this point among the architects. They believed that they were developing in tandem with modernism in the West, but already during the 1950s there was an ongoing trend in the CIAM and Western architecture to criticize modernism. Magazines about the developments could be found in Romania, but critical voices to the existing development of architecture were almost nonexistent. It was clear that architecture in Romania was developing in isolation to the rest of the world, its independent voices silenced.

As a result, there was not much resistance from Romanian architects against the new style also applauded by communist representatives. This allowed the profession's cultural and economic position to be significantly weakened by nationalization. The state absorbed the roles of architect, builder and client leaving no room for individual practices to survive. The production of housing differed now radically from the previous model. The once complex and rich network of people involved in building a family home was replaced by a single, top-down connection between a monolithic state and a single family or person.

By 1949, the traditional system of architecture had been dismantled in Romania.[4] Having eliminated the market for independent architectural practice, architects' influence is diminished further. To purge the profession of future resistance, an epidemic of state-led favoritism began. Behind the smokescreen of competence, architects active before WWII, were replaced by those with a state-approved, 'healthy' social background. Students applying for architectural education were now all submitted to background checks. Surveillance had penetrated the entire profession, architects' pens had effectively been appropriated to further an ideological agenda.

This was an invisible, structural change happening beneath the surface, going mostly unnoticed by ordinary people in their everyday lives. The state establishing control of the profession from within nonetheless had long-lasting impacts on architectural production in Romania.

2.1.2

Erasing the past, imposing a future. The forceful control of a profession was only one subversive method to achieve the ultimate goal: erasing all traces of the past that contradicted the new communist ideology. By the end of 1989, at least 29 towns had been completely restructured, with 37 undergoing this process as part of the state's mass systematization scheme.[5] In an unprecedented attempt at social engineering, the state practiced wide-scale manipulation of individual and collective memory. By wiping away our physical surroundings, our rootedness in place and time is also wiped away. The connection between identity and space is broken. Looking today, the cities and neighborhoods of post socialist countries are still struggling to recover from these dramatic structural shifts in governance, society and mental landscape.

The process involved two major actions. The forced nationalization of family property resulted in mass evictions from multi-generational family homes and relocation to newly built, multi-story housing blocks in a different city. The systematization of villages and cities saw historic urban structures destroyed to make way for mass housing blocks, rationalized roads and erased vessels of collective memory, monuments, squares and public buildings. An estimated 11 000 000 people consisting of families, single people and couples were relocated from privately owned houses to standardized, state-owned apartments. Each person was allocated 12 square meters in the new housing units, regardless of the size of their original dwelling. The original houses were demolished and those living in them were compensated – after delays – usually grossly under the property and home value.

Attempts to contradict the mass systematizations and conflicting views on architectural preservation circulated, particularly at the first half of the communist era from the 1960s to the mid 1970s. Most of Romania's peasants lived in single-family houses in small villages of under 1,999 inhabitants and demolitions usually impacted small, two-

4 Zahariade, Dacia 1300: My Generation, p. 59

5 Giurescu, The Razing of Romania's Past, preface

Calea Moşilor, Bucharest, 2016.

room wattle and daub – a traditional building method using a timber frame with clay and straw infill – houses of these rural towns. The everyday, vernacular buildings were not considered of architectural or historical importance. A typical tactic of the state for justifying the demolition of historic buildings was leaving them without maintenance until they were uninhabitable from dereliction. Progressive protection and restoration measures were agreed upon prior to 1977, after which the earthquake changed the direction of planning. Though many towns and cities in Moldavia were systematized – Iaşi, Constanța, Buzau, Focşani, Galați, Tulcea – Brăila seems to have been for the most part overlooked, retaining some of its historical features. This includes the peripheral neighborhood of Chercea, its single story houses and dense, small-scale grain remaining intact.

During the last half of Ceausescu's regime – between 1978 and 1980 – up to 90 percent of traditional architecture was wiped away, replaced by mass housing of a radically different scale and style, in an also drastically altered urban setting.[6]

"The value, the importance and the significance of popular architecture is universally acknowledged. This rural heritage–houses, households and sites of specific fabric–is the very synthesis of a people's history and expresses the national identity. To destroy this rural heritage and to replace it with standardised construction means not only to destroy a centuries-long evolution but at the same time to change the essence of a nation through a kind of social engineering never seen and never before accomplished at this scale in Europe's long history." [7]

2.1.3

The disappearance of public space. While people's private identities and histories were being destroyed through mass systematizations of property, another assault was being carried out on the community at large. There was an organized effort by the communist regime to destroy or replace public spaces, monuments and buildings that threatened ideology.

This had long-term and devastating effects on Romanians' relationship to public space and notions of community. Many communist governments in the Balkan countries took on a 'de-fencification'[8] of the city, removing fences around museums, churches and housing, changing the appearance and experience of the city drastically. A nuanced diffusion between private, semi-public and public disappeared, replaced by abrupt divisions and an almost all-encompassing field of surveillanced public space.

The spatial impact of this was no doubt dramatic, but the real tragedy was the omnipresence of state surveillance in public space, effectively erasing the traditional notion of public space as a place of plurality and freedom of expression. People felt the only island of privacy was the confines of their own home, and even there you could not always escape the prying eyes of the state. Now, free social interaction happened only within the walls of the small, poorly lit standard-issue apartments, while the public space outside served as a vast stage to act out the life of a happy, productive citizen.

In her book *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt, underlines that it is exactly this sudden change in the urban fabric of the city – destroying historical public space to impose a new synthetic ideology – that is destructive to a functioning public life and community:

"Only the existence of the public realm and the world's subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the lifespan of mortal men." [9]

This type of socio-spatial manipulation carried out during Communism erases the common history of people inscribed on common ground. Not only were rural villagers removed from their forefathers' lands, the physical heritage of the established cities was destroyed beyond recognition. At this time, the differences between two forms of social organization – *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – became increasingly distinct. These two concepts of social organization were developed by

6 *Giurescu, The Razing of Romania's Past, p. 39*

7 *Giurescu, The Razing of Romania's Past, p. 23*

8 *Hirt, Iron Curtains, p. 138*

9 *Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 55*

map of areas demolished in Bucharest during Communism.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in the nineteenth century. As the most organic form of society, *Gemeinschaft* is described as a society made up of individuals who share a responsibility to community despite little else in common. These forms of society are usually found in rural areas, where individuals are born into a community and remain bound to it. Relationships between people are bound in history and space, local identities reinforced by shared rituals and kinship. *Gesellschaft* on the other hand is a product of urbanization. Interpersonal relationships cannot develop organically, they are founded on abstract contracts based on money for example. People in cities are not bound by a shared history in a shared place anymore. The communist regime also aimed to break these organic ties and standardize the living arrangements of people under the guise of equality.

The public space no longer supported an open exchange of ideas, minority groups or dissident voices to the established order. It represented the complete opposite of true publicness: a strictly regulated monoculture. People from all walks of life were forced to live side-by-side, in these blocks under equal status of tenant.

"Consequently, it was only in this type of society that the mix of social classes actually happened, embodying the modernist dream of the same dwelling for all, which never materialised in liberal societies." [10]

For communists, the public sphere symbolized a uniform, harmonious society, but there was a disjunction between what the public sphere symbolized and what its lived reality actually was. This reflected perhaps the utopian visions of modernism, but the notions of public and private domains were nonetheless twisted under Communism into something vastly different from the spaces of democracy modernist architects envisioned. Public space under Communism did nothing more than uphold an illusion.

2.1.4

Constructing representations: monuments to communism. Contrary to popular opinion, not all architecture produced under Communism was low quality. For a period, Romanian architects under the illusion of developing parallel with Europe architecturally, enjoyed designing buildings that they believed would represent the values of Communism to the outside world. Huge complexes provided unprecedented architectural challenges. Technically challenging industrial, holiday resort and housing complexes of high architectural value were produced during this time.

"Repeating, in a way, the beginnings of Modernism in the world, the industrial architecture of the Communist period represents a sort of free-zone where modern ideas and forms are tried and put into practice." [11]

Both the housing complexes and industrial architecture built at the beginning of the regime embodied modernist ideals, but Zahariade argues that it is specifically the industrial architecture that continues the tradition of Romanian interwar modernism. Even 'triumphant' characteristics could be detected in some of the ambitious projects between 1966-1975. Ceausescu sharply criticized this turn, stating the buildings themselves should not be works of art, but be centers for producing objects so well manufactured they can be seen as works of art. The reason for the vast industrial complexes, now crumbling on the peripheries of cities was that half of state budget between 1966-1975 invested in industrial development.[12]

Just as the monumental projects of Louis Kahn or Le Corbusier strove to epitomize modernist ideals of democracy, these industrial monuments communicate a Communist economic ideology, holding symbolic and political value of equal weight. And like even the most misjudged of modernist projects, these also enjoy a protected status because they can always be validated through technological and scientific progress.

Currently, cities in former socialist countries and the West make changes to their physical structure to become more appealing to outsiders. Historical city centers, public space and cultural institutions and events are tirelessly improved to attract more tourists and investors. Manipulation of the built form of urban centers was also carried out by the communist regime to communicate a message, albeit a different one. It was the market-led development of the so-called capitalist cities that communist era architecture reacted against, declaring it the enemy. On the contrary of

10 Ghenciulescu, Urban Spaces in Action, p. 11

11 Zahariade, Dacia 1300: My Generation, p. 67

12 Zahariade, Dacia 1300: My Generation, p. 66

"Long life and prosperity to our dear Socialist Republic of Romania"

wanting to project an image of itself to the outside world, at the end of Ceausescu's regime, Romanian architecture acted to further an ideology within the borders of the country. Apart from a few cases, architecture in Romania furthered country's isolation from the rest of Europe.

2.2

After the revolution: socio-spatial repercussions of a transition.

Once the centralized system of governance collapsed, a new force carried on the tradition of transforming Romanian landscapes: the unbridled growth of neoliberal market ideologies brought about new patterns of disintegration, individualization and dislocation. The sudden void in regulation and control in the building sector coupled with a surge of new information from the outside allowed new building forms and practices to multiply wildly within a short timespan. Public opinion on state-led building and regulation following the collapse of Communism was highly negative – contributing to the permissive attitude to new, unregulated building practices.

Now the resorts, power plants and abattoirs – these huge monuments of Communism – were left to disintegrate on the peripheries of cities. Communist state planning had produced highly specialized regions and cities economically, usually producing only a small range of goods in a country-wide system of production:

"When state direction of the economy was discontinued, production processes in many sectors of the economy were paralyzed; complex economic systems ceased to function, and reorientation toward the world market made any domestic products unsalable." [13]

The organization in place failed to provide an alternative economic and administrative basis for these infrastructures to survive. Emigration and de-urbanization resulted, giving rise to a number of shrinking cities throughout the country. Regions that lost the means to produce, lost working-age population. The young and educated left for better opportunities abroad. Many areas were ill prepared for the open competition of the market, shifting the demographics radically in Romania. Shrinkage essentially meant the loss of population and the structures that support life in the city.

2.2.1

Fortresses in hollow cities. Privatization in the building sector brought change to the production of space: primacy was given to the individual over the collective; to market forces over regulation. Within a decade, suburbs underwent a condensed evolution in form and social structure. Ownership is idolized, private property acts as an indicator of wealth. Western lifestyles were imported directly into rural villages, producing wild disparities in architectural language and continuity: half finished cinder block villas towered next to centuries-old vernacular dwellings. Neighborhoods seem to have three layers:

"Everyday life and work in postsocialist cities are being reconstituted from elements of socialist and presocialist traditions, from components of Western social systems conveyed through politics and the media, and from newly created hybrids–all of it making up the great diversity of urban life in postsocialist societies." [14]

In the early 2000s, Romania's EU membership sped up emigration, furthering the shrinkage of small towns and villages. Certain villages stood empty almost year-round. The working age population moved to France, Italy or Spain, sending money to build new, single-family homes. The houses – or more often villas – appeared on the edges of villages, surrounded by as many indicators of wealth as the owner can afford. Tennis courts, football fields, Ferraris dot the open lawn in front of half-built homes. Diaspora has had spatial and economic impacts, those making the largest contribution having been physically absent from the community for years. This new layer of building seems artificially imposed, physically and morphologically removed from the traditional urban patterns that survived communist systematization. The appearance of villages and cities became disjointed and polarized. Displays, representations of wealth existed within the same villages as scattered shack settlements inhabited by the extremely poor.

Construction projects were carried out informally due to the government's inability to enforce laws during the transition from a planned economy to a market economy.

13 *Beyer, Shrinking Cities, Vol. 1, p. 74*

14 *Beyer, Shrinking Cities, Vol. 1, p. 75*

abandoned abattoir, Brăila periphery, 2016

Sometimes the legal framework was just too rudimentary to deal with the new demands of neoliberal capitalism. In cities, this informal construction took on larger proportions, resulting in a new form of urbanism. The wild forms and erratic distribution of the villas is partially a result of this weak institutional structure, but also the result of cultural changes.

"What's the point of having money if you don't show it?" [15]

Many who stayed behind in the villages scathingly call this income "strawberry picking money". The villas of these families are seen as nothing short of prisons, holding "criminals" flaunting shady, foreign money. With its blatant emulation of Hollywood style, this practice of displaying wealth through buildings may seem like an extreme form of materialism, a fetishization of ownership. In reality though, this phenomenon is a decades long, dedicated practice of building a house one piece at a time. Those sending money often live poorly in the country they work. This tenacity speaks of need that goes beyond displaying wealth. It is a way of reclaiming something lost during communism, of re-establishing an identity and individuality.

2.2.2

Fences and malls. One other striking symptom of this socio-economic transition is the proliferation of high fences around private properties in suburbs. During Communism the manipulation of public and private zones served as a tool for oppression, but the divide between public and private has become only more pronounced after Communism. Imposing gates, impermeable fences and security cameras represent and function as a freedom from the public realm today. The relentless surveillance of the communist era has been turned around in the neoliberal economy: the cameras are now pointed outwards from the fortified walls of private citizens' newly built homes, towards a neglected public space. As a strong counter-reaction to decades of forced nationalization of property and the destruction of individual and locality-specific living environments, fences provide a psychological refuge from the scrutiny of outsiders and a haven for expressing individual identity. Public space is seen largely in a negative light, full of distrust, traumatic memories, and chaos. This, coupled with the state's lack of maintenance in public spaces today, adds to people viewing their homes as sanctuary from a 'broken' and 'messy' realm. Essentially, these fences act as a border to the contingencies of public space.

"There is an intense, deeply emotional attachment to and pride in marking private space for its own sake by drawing a solid, impermeable border around it." [16]

Despite seeing improvements in the public spaces of major cities in Romania recently, the city of Brăila – and more intensely Chercea – still suffer from a lack of care for public space and its amenities. Public parks, streets, sidewalks and garbage disposal systems are examples where neglect is particularly visible. The public view the care for these spaces to be the responsibility of the city and as a result, these spaces go untended by both, reinforcing the visual and psychological divide between public and private. The lackluster attitude towards public space is particularly visible in the neighborhood of Chercea, where high fences cut off well-tended yards from sidewalks littered with uncollected garbage.

In some ways, socialist neighborhoods provided better for its inhabitants than the current governance. Cultural affordances such as sports, cinema and parks were common and accessible to all. Particularly in sports, socialist neighborhoods were more integrative socially than today's neighborhoods. These amenities, along with a convergence of interests and tastes, established a framework for daily community practices, central to sustaining urban communities. These daily practices were also related to the existence of small-scale nodes in daily trip networks. Schools, pubs, parks all acted as points of reference for communities.

What social spaces are available to the youth today? As some of the most visible interventions into post socialist urban fabric, malls form the backdrop for much of social life today. Placed at both central and peripheral locations, these developer-led projects expanded over some of the last open, public space at the hearts of cities like Bucharest, replacing potential community space with commercial enclosure. Like property fences, malls have created exclusive enclaves within the city.

15 Interviewee, Pride and Concrete, short documentary http://www.prideandconcrete.com/multimedia.php (accessed 9.5.17)

16 Hirt, Iron Curtains, p. 146

Communist-era housing block, Bucharest, 2015

"Going out means going to the mall. Obviously, this going out is exclusively linked to consumption and takes place in this protected indoor space; the connection between these autistic complexes and their urban context is non-existent." [17]

Marc Augé speaks about these commercial centers as a type of place devoid of identity, history and relationship with its surroundings. Architecturally, the malls may not impart any rootedness or identity, but their undeniable popularity among the younger generation reveals nonetheless that these spaces play a role in the construction of identities. The windowless air-conditioned interior provides a space in which to reconstruct identities without the burden of history.

2.3

New perspectives on engaged architecture.

The fall of the totalitarian regime resulted in state withdrawal from all public and housing projects leaving spatial production in cities open to private entrepreneurs. Although this resulted in damaging spatial practices and poorly designed urban spaces, just as in the major structural shifts in the West, it left voids in which new, experimental forms of urbanism could develop.

2.3.1

Context specificity. In their exhibition and catalogue *Urban Activation in Romania,* authors Goagea and Caciuc point out that creating uses for the space should not be confused with identifying the critical value of the space. Cities have shown concern for parks and other public spaces, but the discussion centers around technical and ornamental aspects, stagnating on a superficial level. Superficial formalist designs should be rejected and the past and present conditions – whatever they may be – should be embraced. This openness to context is an argument for embracing the unspectacular. The intrinsic value of a space has been there before new development projects and its qualities have been accumulated over time. Projects should aim to draw out these sometimes hidden potentials of the space, instead of imposing new uses altogether. The value of time can never be entirely substituted.

The identification of a space's essential qualities – including material aspects – is a practice ignored by development projects in Romania today. Notions of material exploitation and recycling are explored, removing this phenomenon from the private realm of single home building, and suggesting public applications.

"The rehabilitation involves a complex process of understanding the social, cultural and urban condition. Remaking stands for a critical journey, a reduction of strong interventions, rejecting tabula rasa and heroic, formalist and rhetoric mega-projects, the respect for the past and the present which are connected to appropriating the space naturally." [18]

Recovering urban fragments through remaking, rehabilitation, and recycling requires an in-depth understanding and sensitivity to the local context. The process of design should be though of as a circuit: design and building are exploitative and invasive actions, the process should be seen through the lens of material reciprocity. After the systematizations outlined by Giurescu, an increased sensitivity should be developed to questions of preservation and heritage. Lastly, the authors point out: how will good architecture survive in a degenerating context? Care for context should be taken solely on the basis of this.

2.3.2

Networks of reciprocity. A substantial second economy developed during communism and became reliant on a centralized structure and the network of connections within it. The collapse of socialism upset the network of relations and loyalties, causing individual actors in the production chain to make new allegiances on a more local, horizontal level.

"From a system of production where the state was clearly the exploiter of labor–and workers were fully conscious of this fact–there emerged a chaotic system in which it was completely unclear who owned what, who was exploiting whom, why there suddenly seemed to be not enough money to go around, and why nothing was as it was expected to be in the first flush of post revolutionary enthusiasm." [19]

17 *Ghenciulescu, Urban Spaces in Action, p. 13*

18 *Goagea & Caciuc, Urban Activation in Romania, p. 66*

19 *Verdery, Shrinking Cities, p. 109*

Cajvana, Bucovina. Money earned abroad is used to build family villas in small towns.

Casa Ion Marian, Belciugatele, 2016, under construction.

Continued scarcity after the revolution upholds these informal networks of material reciprocity. The networks involved in the production of urban space transitioned through three stages: pre-socialist, socialist and post socialist. Traditionally, the development of urban form was determined by family structures, which were flattened out into a hierarchical top-down model during Communism. After the market reform, individual interests dominated, though networks have become more broad again, with collaborations taking place outside of family circles, with public institutions, NGO's or private businesses. The power hierarchy and balance has changed, the state is no longer in a central position in the development of urban space. Still, private business and ordinary people seek to avoid any dealings with the government, usually trying to avoid any public control.

The notions of community were irreversibly damaged during Communism. Anca Tîrcă writes about the problems with the notion of community and communal work in post-socialist Romania.

"In a society undermined by enduring non-democratic practices and disoriented by incoherent democratization processes, without common values, with people suffocated by dozens of problems which do not allow them to consider participating in the community life a priority, the idea of community still appears like a far-off goal." [20]

Traditional, pre-socialist citizens' collectives and associations were broken apart or monitored by the communist regime for purposes of control. The concept of community volunteer work was severely compromised by the work imposed on citizens by the regime in the name of 'patriotism'. In democratic societies of western Europe, volunteering is commonly associated with civic spirit stemming from an innate care and love for their communities.

In a country where building was commonly based around family networks and after that a top-down model, neighborhood initiatives were never commonplace. The idolization of private ownership and a distrust towards

20 *Tîrcă, Urban Spaces in Action, p. 29*

Casa Ion Marian, Belciugatele, 2016, finished.

volunteer work have also impacted the range of community building projects in post-socialist Romania. The next example outlines one non-governmental, non-profit architectural practice that works directly with improving the living conditions of marginalized communities in an inclusive and participative way.

2.3.3

A community project in Belciugatele – a disadvantaged village on the outskirts of Bucharest – is an example of socially and contextually engaged architectural practice in Romania today. Running in its current form since 2014, the Bucharest-based architectural practice Arhipera has developed a model to work closely with local populations to improve the housing conditions of vulnerable families in cities and villages around Romania. The approach is integrative, involving the community from the beginning stages of design and choice of site to construction and other employment, followed by an ongoing rapport with the family after the work is completed.

The conception and process of each house centers around dialogue, which is upheld with both the family in question and the community throughout the process. At the start of each project the community from the village the project is taking place in gathers and reaches a democratic agreement on which family should be built for. In Arhipera, the architect holds the role of initiator, facilitator and mediator, providing a link between a marginalized group and resources to improve their situation. In the book *Evicting the Ghost: Architectures of Survival*, Kai Vöckler calls for increased dialogue between architects and various actors in the design process particularly in post-socialist countries:

"In the new 'governance' structure, planning is 'advocacy planning', which represents the interests of those excluded from the planning and decision-making processes, and uses empowerment strategies in order to facilitate or influence development." [21]

Architects need to develop new planning strategies that respond to a number of different social contexts. Vöckler argues that processes can become participative through utilizing structured dialogue, fostering empowerment of

21 Vöckler, Turbo Urbanism in Evicting the Ghost, p. 193

these marginalized communities. According to Vöckler, the architects of today hold superficial roles in typical development projects of post-socialist countries. It is common that the architect is only consulted for 'in order to ensure the quality the investors want – meaning, the signal effect of the buildings.'[22] At its worst, the architect is used again as a tool to convey the status of the developer or institution behind the project. In the work of Arhipera, the architects' roles as only an instrument for producing representations of power is challenged. Not only does engaging in dialogue with communities break down hierarchies between the architects-as-facilitators and those being helped, it pulls the architect out of this conventional role of mere tool for the rich and powerful into the role of an independent thinking body.

In addition to questioning the role of the architect, Arhipera bases their practice on responding to the specific cultural, material and social conditions of each context they work in. Each home constructed answers the specific needs of a family and the characteristics of the land it is built on. The designs of the homes address material cycles and scarcity by using local or recycled construction materials. By using locally available resources, the houses are easily repaired. While each project works with conditions of extreme scarcity, the use of materials and construction methods vary by what material and manpower or technology are locally available.

When visiting the site of the then ongoing Arhipera project in Belciugatele, I remember being struck by the 'designed' look of the small home under construction. Humanitarian architecture is traditionally associated with tent-like impermanent structures or mud hut typologies. Even less socially oriented projects seem to take on this aesthetic in order to communicate a certain set of values. The house in Belciugatele did not fall directly into this category, seeming at once to look costly yet unadorned, almost ascetic. The projects of Arhipera actively engage with the aesthetics of their buildings, intentionally investing effort in their designs, not leaving form to follow function entirely. The designs retained a vernacular appearance, but the scale, choice of materials and construction method have been a direct result of local conditions, not historical romanticization or a specific glorification of vernacular style. If working context specifically with housing, it is not possible to avoid vernacular typologies entirely, they have been born from the conditions of that place and any separate effort to 'hide' that would also seem superficial. The building in Belciugatele stood out, and fit into its context. During my visit, Lorin Niculae – the founder of Arhipera – discussed the intangible significance of design. To have an aspect of design is to lend value to something, not only a pleasant visual appearance. The homes are more than just shelters, they also stand for hope, and dignity for those who live in them and the work carried out. Finding a balance between functionality, participative practices and appearance form the crux of socially engaged architecture.

The chance to adapt the house to meet specific living conditions is also addressed through a level of functional indeterminacy in the design. The homes are constructed to incorporate into their structure the possibility of future expansions with minimal effort or flexible uses of the same space. In the case of the Belciugatele family, the construction is a more closed typology, with heavier construction materials including cinder block and cement. In other locations, materials such as tarp, plastic bottles and wood make up a frame and infill system lending levels of adaptability to the building envelope. Recycled materials are also used because they are more locally available. This is also a way of ensuring continuity: the families are more likely to remain if their homes can meet a range of life situations. Habraken's 'support and infill' theory can be seen in this approach to open-ended design. Arhipera sees a value in this user and material specificity: the homes become a way to establish and foster individual family as well as local identity.

Commonly the ideals of single practices in architecture are communicated through the project itself, Arhipera's work extends beyond the village contexts they work in. Working with a considerable number of students from the architectural faculty of Ion Mincu at University in Bucharest, the work takes on a pedagogical role, facilitating participation and education through on-site construction and design workshops with the students. Lorin Niculae discusses the broader impact of the work in his PhD thesis:

22 Vöckler, Turbo Urbanism in Evicting the Ghost, p. 191

Casa Enache, Belciugatele, completed 2014.

"Pentru aceasta, este imperios necesară formarea unei generaţii de arhitecţi care să poată să medieze, să poată să faciliteze, să poată să comunice şi să se comunice grupurilor vulnerabile, sa poată lucra în şi cu comunităţi dezavantajate, pe scurt, **arhitecţi sociali.** ***Ei vor avea capacitatea să reconstruiască România prin libertate, echitate şi solidaritate, aşa cum Arhipera a început, deja, să o facă."*** [23]

"Therefore, it is imperative to form a generation of architects who can mediate, facilitate and communicate with vulnerable groups and work with disadvantaged communities. In short, to form social architects. They will be able to rebuild Romania by freedom, equality and solidarity, as Arhipera has already begun to do."

Though Arhipera's work concentrates largely in rural contexts or small villages, works primarily with housing and aims for permanence, their work embodies many concepts covered in this thesis and in Parcul Chercea. It is essentially a context specific practice, with the role of the architect being facilitator. The context of the project is specifically addressed through working with material cycles and understanding the scarcities of that place. Also, extended dialogue as one form of communication with the local population and giving marginalized or forgotten people dignity and identity.

23 Niculae, Arhipera_Arhitectura Socială Participativă, p. 215

3. PLACE, POTENTIAL: ENGAGING THE MATERIAL AND SOCIAL

Introduction and photo essay.

The third section of the thesis is both a description and reflection on the process and outcome of rehabilitating a community space in Chercea – a peripheral neighborhood in Brăila, a city on the Danube in Eastern Romania. Each activity or intervention in the park embodies broader concepts of socially and contextually engaged architecture in their aim to respond to specific conditions in the neighborhood. During the project, the focus was on methods of understanding the context as well as ways of fostering a connection between the space and those who use it.

Reflecting back on the development of the project, our relationship to the neighborhood and its people divides into roughly two stages: a state of isolation from the community at the beginning, followed by a turning point in the project that facilitated social relationships between us and the local population. The actions carried out in the park are largely experimental in nature and the aim of this section is to understand their significance within a wider framework of architectural practice.

The following images reflect the experience of Chercea in the first week. The material gathered relied heavily on observation of social practices in the neighborhood. There are as many perspectives as there are participants in this project and this is my personal reflection on the process and outcome of the project.

an entrance to Chercea –

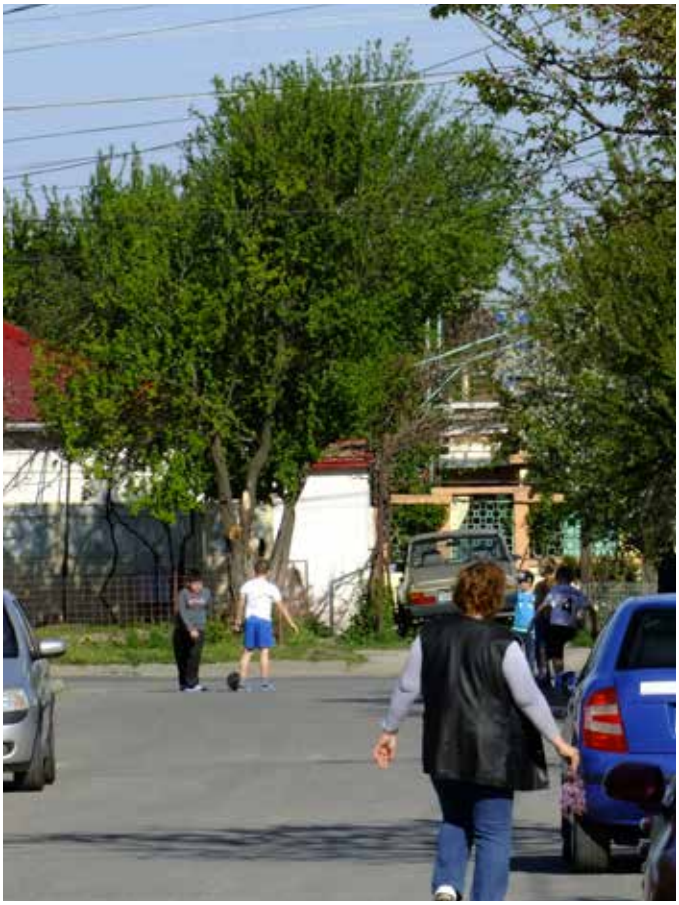
separated from the city by railway tracks, the neighborhood remains peripheral

a park in Brăiliţa, a neighboring suburb

Parcul Chercea, the only open community space in the neighborhood

football was played anywhere

kids climbing on a derelict WWI monument



people and cars share the street–a host for public life in Chercea

making use of a smooth, flat surface

hanging out

street corners

as meeting places

ad-hoc seating arrangements

and the importance of shade

seating

a grill

D-I-Y accessibility

Chercea facade ornamentation

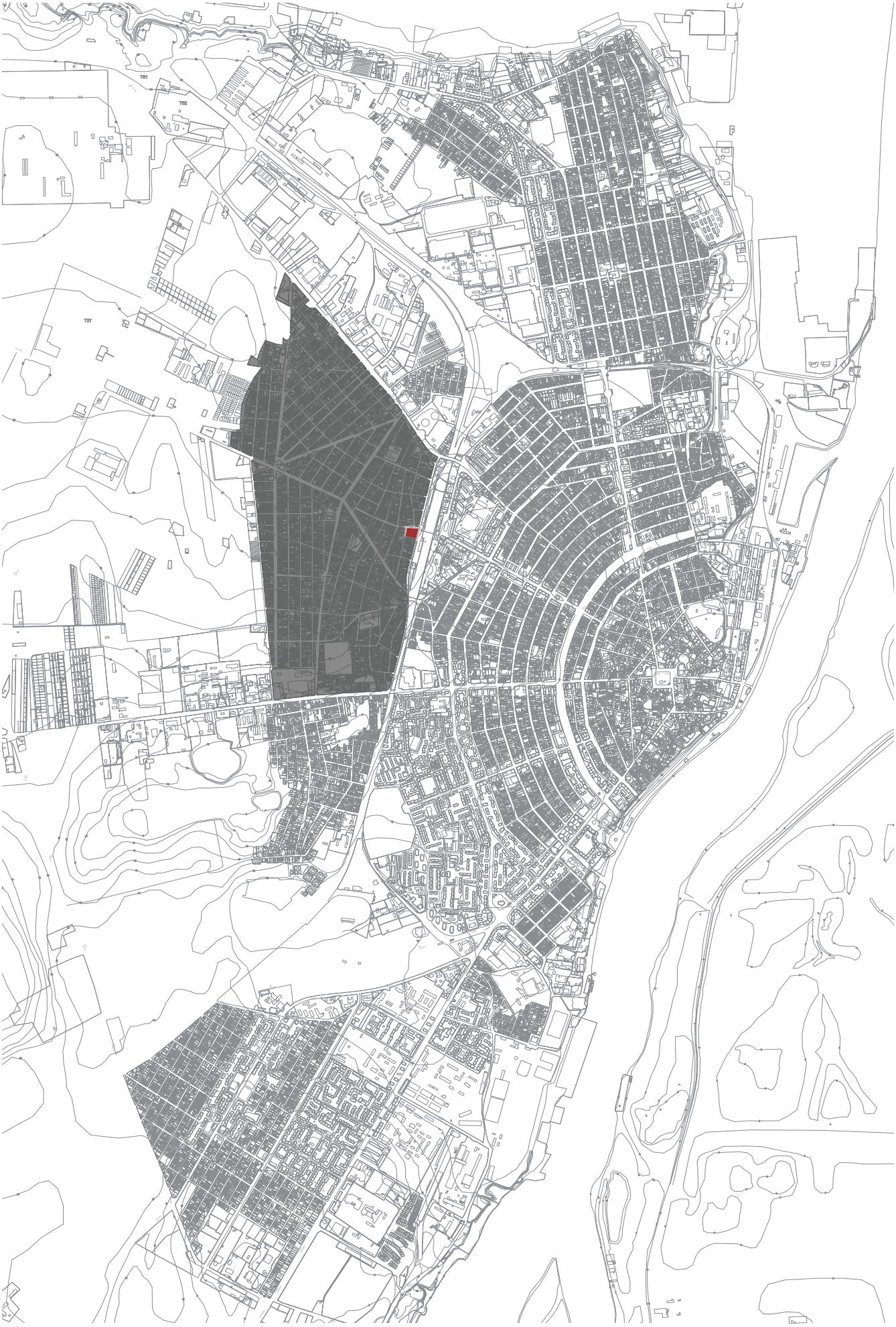
the use of white paint

and its significance in the neighborhood

reused plastic bottles protecting plants in early spring

grapes as a resource in the neighborhood–provides shade in the summer and wine

layers of enclosure in the neighborhood



Brăila, Chercea marked in darker grey, Parcul Chercea marked in red.

Parcul Chercea, aerial.

3.1

Approaching Chercea.

Limited at first to studying the place from a distance of over two thousand kilometers, piecing together an understanding of Brăila began from maps and second-hand accounts. Inching along the city's streets on Google Street View and bemusedly clicking through cryptically named layers on a municipal CAD file constituted some of our first understandings of the city. Lectures and selected books on the city's history provided another, more specific, but equally distant channel of information. The secondary sources were plentiful, detailed and precise, but still offered a limited scope of information. The limits of secondary information about Brăila and the gaps in our knowledge only became apparent upon arrival. By diminishing the geographical, cultural and temporal distances between us and the city we moved from the general to the specific, from the intellectual to the experiential. Getting to understand the place thoroughly involved both studying the very specific and investigating the indeterminate. This next section describes phases we moved through, slowly narrowing the distance between us, the space and those we were, in the end, designing for.

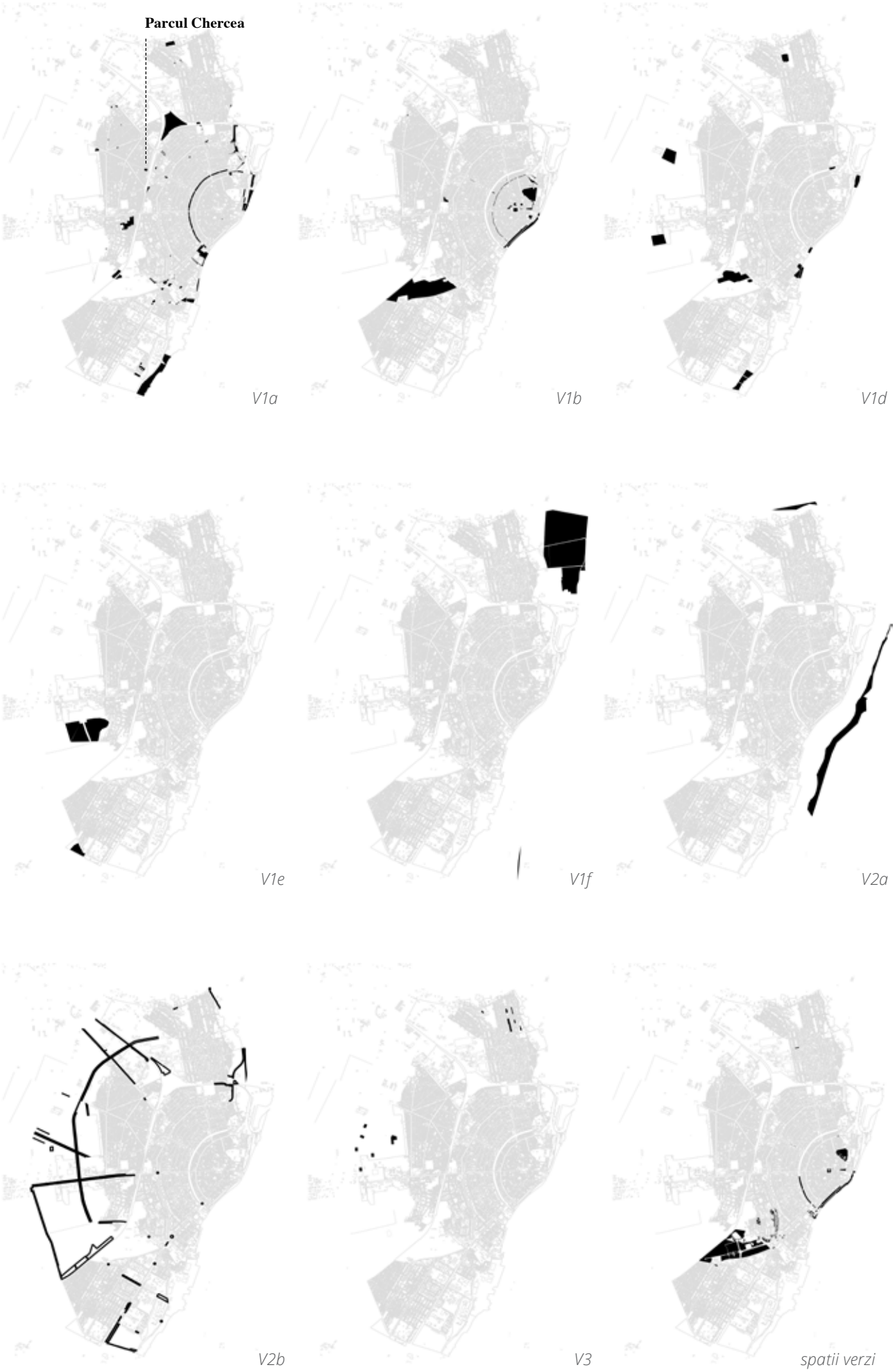
3.1.1

Distance, and scale. Reflecting back on the process of understanding the context, it is clear that our physical distance to the city, neighborhood and space impacted the quality of our knowledge. At the start of the project, the city and its spaces could only be viewed from a vast distance – through historical accounts, translated fragments of local news, lists of endemic tree species, lines on a map representing lived space. As a student looking to do well on a course, it is easy to overlook that our knowledge of Brăila was in fact largely curated before we even set foot in the city. Excluding the Internet and any independent research, the pool of material available to us was predetermined by the organizers of the course. Beyond this, even the choice of going to this particular, shrinking city to educate future architects spoke of certain values entrenched in the architectural community. Prior to visiting, the preparatory exercises – identifying neglected spaces, material displacement changing how we view material and examples of working with scarcity – further impacted our approach to Brăila.

We automatically – but not incorrectly – saw the city through the lens of shrinkage and scarcity. Knowing only this and the issues that come with it, attributing any unexplainable phenomena to the broad framework of shrinkage was easy. Once there, reality was more complex though. History, economics, culture and society all wound together to produce certain atmospheres and spatial conditions, in which shrinkage and its effects undoubtedly played a part. During the course of our visit, this broad issue of shrinkage decreased in importance, replaced by more place-specific issues. Although being an effective tool in prioritizing major issues, secondhand material on its own gives an oversimplified understanding of the specific, but complex conditions. Although arguably necessary, the limits of secondary sources contribute to the argument on the primacy of firsthand experience of place.

In a time that is hyper-focused on the individual, on star-architects and their achievements, it is easy to forget that we work in a framework of acquired knowledge and are not immune to the imposed knowledge of others. Our understanding of Brăila was mediated through other individuals, decades, pages of books and Google Translate. The blank space that existed between us and the city was readily filled with information that others saw appropriate for us to know thus shaping future courses of action. The act of providing information is a position of great responsibility. I am not arguing that second-hand knowledge should be rejected – on the contrary it should be welcomed – but an awareness of our impressionability is essential, as is moving beyond secondary sources to first-hand knowledge.

The difference between understanding a place through mediated knowledge compared to first-hand knowledge can be compared to looking at a map instead of standing there in person. Viewing the space at different scales affects the type of knowledge gathered – each zoom-in bringing out information with different natures. As we moved closer – first into the neighborhood and then onto the site – the scale became larger, and our collected knowledge more specific, more embodied. The scale of studying the site eventually reached 1:1 and it even moved beyond this, to magnification of certain elements. We began by collecting physical objects and plants and finally working on the site with full-size interventions and people.



Brăila's green spaces and their names as layers on AutoCAD.

At 1:1, what we knew about the space was now based on lived experience, on reality – not representation.

The ability to visit in person allowed us to freely narrow in on an areas that were interesting for various, indefinable reasons at first. We found Chercea, a large neighborhood behind railway tracks on the outermost edge of the city. One striking aspect of Chercea is the lack of open, public space and the level of deterioration in public amenities compared to other public spaces in the city. Benches missed wooden parts, sidewalks were overgrown with weeds, while self-built single-story homes stood behind high fences. These features along with its peripheral position set it apart from other districts in the city. Chercea at once seemed to suffer most from scarcity, yet it exhibited certain social practices that lent it a separate identity from its neighbors.

3.1.2

Collecting fragments. What can be learned about a people and a space without spoken communication or interaction? Without a shared language, discussions were limited or non-existent with the local people during the first weeks in Brăila. Before visiting, we were reliant on an outsider's opinion about the city, now we were faced with the task of understanding a neighborhood within the city non-verbally and first-hand. There was almost no documentation on this particular neighborhood. The first weeks were spent in isolation from the surrounding community, collecting what material we could about Chercea – sometimes venturing further into the city and neighboring districts.

We began with the most simple of actions: walking. From the perspective of scale, walking provided an method of zooming in to the context, experiencing it at 1:1. In his critical work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau devotes a chapter to discuss the relationship between the city and those who walk in it. He begins with the description of climbing to the 110th floor of the World Trade Center to look down on Manhattan. De Certeau asks: 'Is the immense texturology spread out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact?'[1]

This same removal from context was experienced when limited to studying the city through secondary accounts. In addition to being an accessible, non-verbal way of gathering knowledge about a place, the aim of walking was to move away from these predetermined representations of place, away from the role of aloof architects. Descending from the – real or metaphorical – tower breaks down hierarchies between the 'voyeur-god' and the 'ordinary practitioners of the city'[2]. Walking became the first step in understanding the socio-cultural makeup of the neighborhood we would be working in.

The motives and applications of walking have varied. Paris-based Situationists took up walking – or drifting – as a means of recording and documenting the last vestiges of anti-capitalist planning in Paris. Whereas de Certeau called walking a 'pedestrian speech act', drifting for the Situationists was a radical re-reading of the city. Based on these definitions, for de Certeau, walking represented a statement, whereas the Situationists saw it more as a methodology. Visiting and documenting forbidden or peripheral areas – places that the regular public avoided – they studied the roots of psychogeographic appeal, cataloging particular spaces into fragmented maps. For the Situationists though, chance encounters, atmospheres and situations were essential to the full understanding of urban spaces. Chercea was indeed peripheral, and searching for the social in the everyday by aimless wandering resembles the Situationists' drifting to some degree, but walking over the course of one week brought little in the form of encounters with local people. It remained largely an observational exercise. The selected images presented at the beginning of this part were taken during this phase of the project.

Our relation to the local population remained distant, punctuated by bouts of mutual staring over the course of the week. The sense of removal from the neighborhood and its social setting was furthered by the simple act of photography. Instead of simply serving as a documentation device, the camera lens turned the neighborhood into a spectacle and us into consumers of Chercea. Wandering around in a foreign context, how did we differ from the detached tourists criticized by the Situationists? Behind every image seen at the beginning of this chapter, is an underlying, undefinable uneasiness that we are nothing more than privileged voyeurs, tourists.

1 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 92

2 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 93

Parcul Chercea, eye-level view.

The acts of walking and taking pictures maintained the distance between us and the context, but the resulting images should also be treated with caution. The photographs – along with the memories of the walks – provided our only point of reference, scrutinized for clues about Chercea's society and culture. The danger lay in treating these images as representations of an ongoing, unchanging reality. It is easy to forget that the camera captures a single moment in time, a snapshot, the photograph's static nature mistaken for unchanging fact. Framing, composition and detail each manipulate the perception of the object photographed, more conveying the photographer's subjective experience than any objective 'truth'.

"The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." [3]

The images were representations of Chercea, and offered limited objective information about social life and culture. Our understanding of the social and cultural context of Chercea remained as superficial as ever.

3.1.3

Constructing myths. Following this neighborhood-scale research, the point of focus shifted to a neglected plot of land on the edge of the neighborhood. Being the only open green space in the area and situated at a main entrance point, the plot's abandonment was unclear. Pixellated aerial views, fragments of offhand conversations, fragments of scattered objects on the site were documented. The largest, a concrete slide clearly indicated a space intended for play. Even with its stairs missing, it had not been forgotten by the local children who played there still. How long ago since the slide had been new? Parts of a low concrete wall surrounding the space spoke of something decorative, even festive.

A thorough mapping of the site began by locating elements and surface materials by measuring their positions in the defined, sixty by seventy meter space. The surface of the park was scoured for any clues to activity happening in the seemingly abandoned space. Whatever grew within the boundaries was gathered and researched.

Fragmented conceptions of urban environments were discussed in the previous section, produced through the motions of photography and wandering by foot. I would like to point out another activity, both physical and mental, that added more, yet equally fragmented material to our bank of knowledge. Through mapping, collecting, cataloging and measuring, the space and whatever was found in it was made into an artefact. An artefact is usually defined as 'an object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest.'[4] Visiting the park for the first time, it felt natural to treat the space as such, found frozen in time and mute, in a state of neglect. Whereas the surrounding neighborhood could not be mistaken for a simple collection of lifeless elements, on the first visit, our impression of the park was static. For a while, we treated the space as if it was just a collection of parts, left-over relics that could be formally measured, sketched and recorded by photography, but told us little more about the people. As with the photographs, this analysis provided only a snapshot in time.

To understand the effects of this type of 'site analysis' on the knowledge of place, it is necessary to look at the writings of de Certeau again. He describes two forms of knowing: synecdoche and asyndeton. The first essentially describes a part of a whole which includes it, whereas the second essentially means 'unconnected'. De Certeau explains that synecdoche 'expands a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a "more" and take its place'[5]. Asyndeton in turn 'opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics.'[6] He speaks about these two especially in conjunction with analyzing everyday spatial practices. The abandoned park space or concrete slide as an object found in the space is susceptible to this type of thinking.

We enthusiastically collected and documented plant specimens, concrete rubble, and categorized objects in the hope of extracting traces of the social from the material context of the park. In doing so, we lent much significance to single things. When looking long enough at only the concrete slide or an empty glass bottle lying under the tree, they became amplified, soon representing things beyond themselves. An awareness of the risk of

3 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, p. 7

4 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/artefact (access 5.5.17)

5 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 101

6 ibid.

Objects, fragments found in Parcul Chercea.

acquiring a distorted view is essential at all distances. Whereas studying a space from a distance leaves much to be guessed at and is often grossly oversimplified, zooming past the scale of 1:1 departs from reality again, becoming another kind of interpretation. Here, fragments are elevated in meaning, sometimes replacing a totality. This type of material analysis represents a choice of what to focus on and expand and what to leave as is, falling under the definition of subjective interpretation. De Certeau warns that this undoes continuity, transforming spaces into 'enlarged singularities and separate islands'.[7]

Artefact as a term originates from the natural and social sciences, but has been appropriated by other fields such as the arts and architecture. In our case it was misleading to use this term. It unnecessarily classified a space as static and furthered our fragmented conception of place. Being linked to scientific method, artefact also implies objectivity, universality. In reality, our investigation of the park space and neighborhood was a highly subjective individual interpretation of one moment in time.

"Because we have already seen or are going to see some of theses places, we consume this semiological mechanism of communication, and the memories we accumulate through direct experience, through narratives, or through the simple accumulation of new signals produce our imagination of the city." [8]

In his text *Terrain Vague,* de Solà-Morales discusses the image of the city mediated through photographs, but this same reflection can be applied to the 'artefacts' we accumulated during our walks and documentations of the park. Is this firsthand knowledge any better than the secondary data we got two thousand kilometers away? De Solà-Morales says it is meaningless to impose a dualist thinking on the mediated and unmediated experience of architectural environment because it is impossible to achieve an honest, authentic and direct experience of our surroundings. Design is subjective, our perception will be different to anyone else's. We had yet another interpretation of the place on our hands. Our 'analysis' is in fact an experience and the resulting design an architectural opinion based on an interpretation of that experience.

The gathered material is by nature fragmented. To fill the remaining knowledge gaps, it was easy to 'expand' the significance of a single image, to universalize it, creating a distorted perception of place as described in de Certeau's synecdoche. Just as the Situationists understood a city by drifting and mapping areas that were of particular interest, we used these collected images and objects to construct a 'myth' of Chercea and the park space, jerry-building our own narrative in an act of 'intellectual bricolage'[9].

The traditional site analysis that architects conduct denotes universality, impartiality and is often treated as an unchanging fact. The word analysis is also misleading. Sometimes it is necessary to determine the exact properties of soil or air quality, but other analysis can be more like an interpretation – contingent and determined by who do it. The closer you get to the 1:1 scale, the more subjective the interpretation and experience. Experiences of walking and photographs cannot be rationalized like lists, maps and impartial historical accounts because they are subject to choice and interpretation. And what would the benefit of a universal and rationalized interpretation of a space be? A design should be personal but most importantly it should also be relevant to those who use it. An architect will always act as a type of filter through which the context they are working in is processed and reinterpreted. And by projecting our subjective views onto the space we become part of it.

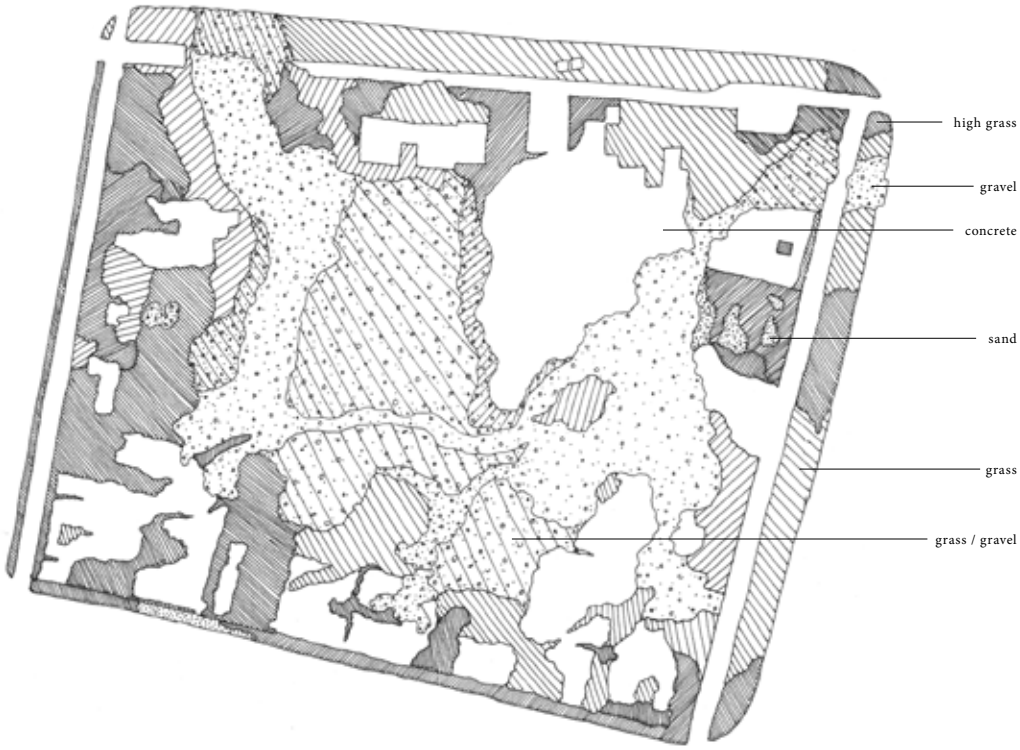
The material gathered deals with the neighborhood and site on a human, ground level perspective, but it remains detached from the community it describes. Walking, taking pictures and mapping material qualities of the site remain an isolated, non-verbal way of describing an environment we sought to understand through the social life that shaped it. This is an issue that the syndicalists and populists were criticized for. Their descriptions of place remained formalistic, open to superficial, commodified appropriations that understood little of the social, economic or political conditions that formed them. Like the populists Venturi and Scott-Brown, in our documentation we engaged in a 'learning from' exercise of Chercea.

"I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades'

7 de Certeau, The Practice of Evryday Life, p. 101

8 de Solà-Morales, Terrain Vague, in Anyplace, p. 119

9 Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, p. 17



Parcul Chercea, surface materials

curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing."[10]

There is something arresting about this piece of text by Italo Calvino, which effectively defines the uneasy feeling after having conducted these thorough mappings of the surface materials and vegetation. Just listing quantities of separate things and their locations was not going to tell us anything.

Its good to be aware of the limitations of these methods. By accepting that our understanding of Chercea was less like an objective analysis and more like a myth – constructed of various bits and pieces – the need for more reliable methods of understanding the space and the people who lived there became apparent. To avoid further distorting our knowledge and creating distance between ourselves and the neighborhood, other methods of studying the context of Chercea were explored. They will be outlined next.

10 Calvino, Invisible Cities, p. 9

Temporary football goals as first intervention.

3.2

Retrieving socio-spatial potentials.

The interventions described in the following chapter represent various ways of engaging with the community and material context of the neighborhood. Having vastly different design outcomes, each action in the park stemmed from a need to know more about the people living there and responding to the needs of the community. The previous section described mapping and photographing exercises, which produced detailed information about the space, but we had not yet managed to speak directly and at length with the local people. Language barriers contributed to this difficulty, but it seemed people were also wary of us and our activities in the space, preferring to keep their distance. Overall our presence on the site incited some tentative curiosity, but conversations remained sporadic and very limited in content.

There was no predetermined, concrete outcome for the interventions when we began, they were first and foremost experimental and investigative, aimed at understanding the character of the space and revealing its latent spatial potentials. At this point there was also no design for the space and only vague ideas to its use. Any new material could influence the direction of our approach to the site. As seen in part one, investigation through intervention is a common point of departure in temporary urbanism today. Through influencing uses of a space by introducing new, yet impermanent structures, temporary architecture marks a state of transition simultaneously in material and function. In this project, not all of the interventions were temporary though, some aimed for permanence and continuity. Other interventions, such as the football goals, transitioned from temporary to permanent. All the actions carried out in the park are nonetheless tied the need to keep learning about the context through engagement – standing as a type of gray area between research and design.

Communication with the local people was carried out through mixed methods. The memory mural was the result of a more traditional, investigative approach that involved narrative and sketching, the results used to

piece together an unofficial history of the park. In the case of the football goals, spoken language was irrelevant: communication with the local youth worked visually, activating the park space through play. In these and other interventions, the park space itself provided a tangible medium through which communication between us and the locals was facilitated.

3.2.1

Activating space, changing perceptions. Temporary football goals were the first physical intervention in the park and acted as an inquiry to the potentials of the space. As the first action, they were also experimental methodologically: their success or failure would influence our future approach to the site and the neighborhood. The goals were initially built to help us better define the space, to give it scale, but we hoped their appearance on the site would allow those passing by to also see the space in a new way. Functionally, the goals answered a very obvious need: our observations of children playing in neighborhood streets revealed a lack of space to play ball games. Despite being very real issues, the goals were more than an attempt to improve the amenities of the neighborhood – they were a continuation of our socio-spatial research, which turned into a mode of non-verbal communication. Working in a non-native context made it difficult to predict reactions or make assumptions and as a result our initial aims were tentative: shifting the park's identity away from a neglected wasteland, towards a space with potential.

Moments after bringing the goals into the park, a clear interest group was drawn into the space: local kids came to ask us what we were doing. It took a few moments to convince the kids they could use the goals, but once we managed to communicate our general idea, they eagerly began searching for a suitable place for the future football field in the park. Toward the end of the day, word had spread in the neighborhood and around twenty kids were hanging out around the park or playing football.

Constructed out of lightweight wood, the design of the goals was predetermined, but their positioning in the park was left open-ended. By keeping the intervention

adaptable – a key tenet of temporary urbanism – the users were given the possibility to exert their influence over the space. The action was participative, but within a framework, narrowing the focus down to spatial considerations, not design-based ones. Our priority was to test the space for different uses, not search for a formal language. Determining the location of the 'playing field' and testing it by playing on it engaged the youth with the space, as a result fostering agency and changing perceptions of the space.

The football goals had found their positions, and a group of kids came up to us and asked what they should do next. What *should* we do next? Not having planned much ahead of the goals, the kids' initiative surprised us and we had to think quickly of ways that the old park could be improved.

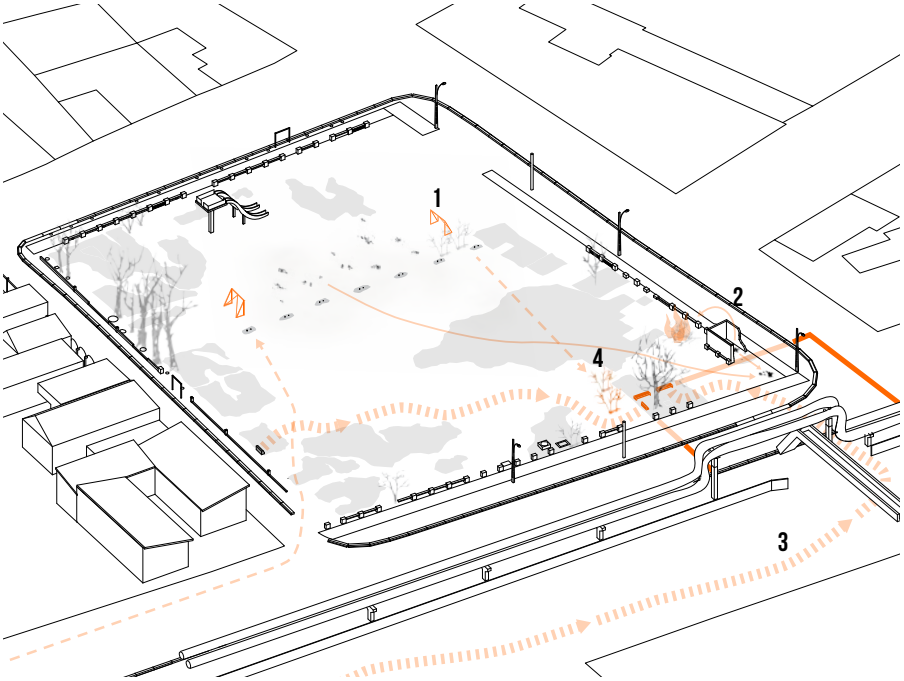
The goals turned out to trigger a chain of other small improvements around the park, revealing more spatial – and material – potentials. Once the position of the field had been decided, it was necessary to clear it of small rocks and bits of rubbish. A row of small trees now also encroached on the field. It was decided to remove them, but instead of simply cutting – a short term solution – we agreed to dig them up and move them to another location where they could eventually grow to provide shade. Other improvements that followed included cleaning up the entrance of the park, finding small benches and cleaning the kiosk ruin. At the end of the few days spent improving the space, a communal bonfire was organized. As a way to get rid of all the organic waste, it also functioned as a type of reward ritual, an act of destruction marking closure for the many acts of rehabilitation over the last few days. The resulting chain of actions work directly with the materials at hand, adding value to them through relocation. As a result of placing two temporary objects in the space as an initial inquiry, we discovered the possibility to engaging in material cycles as a realistic method of improving the space. This approach would continue to be present throughout the project.

The unexpected enthusiasm of the kids also revealed another latent potential: the right action – even a small one – at the right time and place can generate considerable social momentum. By physically shaping the site with collective activity, the forgotten park space receives a new meaning in the eyes of those who participated in shaping it. Participative experiments involving play and games were already used by The Situationists International to 'break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into the activity by provoking his capabilities of revolutionizing his own life.'[1] From the start, it was clear there was a psychological barrier between the residents of the neighborhood and the space. The football goals as well as the chain of activities aimed to break these barriers down. The younger generation of residents seemed to have a lower threshold to enter the park and interact with us than their parents of grandparents. Some of the older residents expressed tired cynicism or wistful melancholy when describing the slow deterioration of their only public space to its present state, whereas the youth had only seen the space as a wasteland or a generic construction site. To them, it had only one identity, not many that had been 'taken' from them by various evils. Perhaps watching the decline of something once good is far more destructive to hope than encountering an already 'semantically empty' space onto which is it easy to project dreams and visions, unencumbered by a memory of what was lost. By facilitating activities where the youth could make an impact on the space we hoped to develop these visions, and make space for new ones, hopefully changing the identity of the space to one that has potential.

3.2.2

Searching for meaningful engagement. Reflecting back, the goals were successful in their engagement with the space and community of youth, but they also raised broader questions of perception and meaning. Though more an instinctive reaction to conditions in the neighborhood at the time, the choice of introducing football goals onto the site was generic and specific at once. Community involvement through sports is widespread and generally very successful, its significance and meaning easily understood on a broad spectrum of society. As the first intervention, we aimed to break down some of the barriers we felt existed between us and the local population by choosing an action that was easily 'readable', to engage in a type of dialogue. Painted white, the two-by-three meter structures were a highly visual intervention, easily understood at a glance. In his book *The Meaning of the Built Environment*, Amos Rapoport discusses the use of symbols and signs in architecture as a way of effectively communicating culturally ingrained

1 *Sadler, The Situationist City, p. 105*



football goals and chain of actions

values or functions to the public. The use and successful reading of a certain visual language or signs relies on an understanding of their meanings within a specific culture. Rapoport points out that sometimes there can be a disjunction between systems of meaning within a single society and time:

"Designers tend to react to their environments in perceptual terms (which are* their *meanings), whereas the lay public, the users, react to environments in associational terms." [2]

Buildings and environments are often designed from a perceptual standpoint and evaluated by the public in an associational way. Rapoport's division raises questions about the democratic nature of design: whose meaning should be considered? An intervention that is too abstract or 'architectural' would impose a hierarchy and further the cultural distance between us and the neighbors. The football goals were successful in this respect – it was not difficult for the users to adopt them since their meaning was easily understood. By introducing objects that are anchored in a universally understood system of symbols, we opened up a mode of communication between us and the users of the space. The collective work in the park over the course of the next few days narrowed the social and cultural distance between us – the architects, foreigners – and the locals. Non-verbal, direct action in the space as well as short discussions provided valuable windows into better understanding the context – and the people we were designing for.

The effectiveness of the football goals in engaging the community of young people can be attributed to their easy 'readability', but could they stand as symbols for more than the game itself? Being warned of thieves in the neighborhood we hoped that painting the frame white would communicate ownership and care, hopefully deterring thieves. Observing the enthusiasm with which the goals were appropriated by the young people, perhaps they stand for more than the sport – perhaps care, effort or just a change in a peripheral neighborhood.

Another intervention carried out during the same week showed that just any action or improvement would not elicit the same enthusiastic response. As a counter example to the football goals, I would like to describe the white square – also a socio-spatial 'inquiry'. The square revealed some issues about perception and meaning that were relevant also in later stages of the project. With the square, we aimed to highlight the entrance point to the neighborhood and park. It was constructed from a strip of white paint on the road and two white benches. Not only would it underline the significance of the entrance point, it was also testing if the white line on the road had an effect on the speed of cars driving by. Reaching across the road, the white square could work as a pedestrian crossing, allowing people to walk across the road more safely.

The language barrier was not the most unsurpassable obstacle in communicating the significance of the white square to the youth who had taken an interest in our activities. Although it was connected to the activities of improving the space, the white square remained the most abstract and 'designed' of all the interventions. Owing to the difficulty in communicating its significance though, public participation would not have been based on consensus and understanding, but just on the gratifying nature of painting anything. *Why not let them paint?* The successful execution of this intervention required precision and control. In other words, the painting needed to stay strictly in the lines, otherwise the intervention's visual impact and therefore meaning would be weakened. We were faced with a dilemma. We could allow the children to paint, compromising the quality of the design, or come to the site at four in the morning to avoid both kids and traffic to carry out the intervention swiftly and precisely. We chose the latter.

Issues of control and freedom in participative processes are discussed by artist Claire Bishop in her article *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*. Through examples of collaborations of varying success, Bishop expands on the difficulties in navigating this tricky terrain between total control and total freedom in a process of spatial artistic production. She cites examples of public collaborations from Thomas Hirschhorn and Istanbul-based Oda Projesi as two extremes. Both projects are founded on collaboration between artist and the public, but one gives full control to the participants and the other essentially uses the public as a free workforce under the guise of participation. Bishop attempts to answer the same questions raised within participative practices in

2 *Rapoport, The Meaning of the Built Environment, p. 19*

white square

the last fifty years:

"The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception." [3]

There exists a belief that a form of self-sacrifice is necessary, where architects or artists 'renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her.'[4] This thinking holds close ties to the early architects as populists and facilitators who attempted to break down modernism's deterministic grip on design practice. Bishop points out that this approach creates a stark dichotomy between 'useless' aesthetics and the 'practical' realm of social concerns. This literal interpretation is manifested in projects where complete control is ceded to the participants as a placatory method. Bishop argues that thinking of the aesthetic and the functional as separate realms from each other misses the point. The aesthetic itself already holds within it this contradiction.

Though mainly critiquing artistic spatial practices, Bishop's argument effectively breaks down the simplistic categories of engaged and non-engaged, architect and public, control and freedom. There are multiple methods of engaging the public – each having a different participative level – the architect's roles ranging from authoritarian to tool for the masses. The following section attempts to describe and understand some of the more nuanced modes of public engagement during the project.

Feeling guilty as dawn approached and the white square neared completion, I was forced to evaluate our relationship with the kids – our public – who we worked with for the past few days. Some type of balance should be found between total control and total freedom. In his manifesto, architect and activist Giancarlo de Carlo strongly advocates for participation in design, but where would he place the moral responsibility of the architect to question the desires and motivations of 'architecture's public'? If there is no control from the architect, they become tools again, just for a new kind of 'elite'. He concedes:

"Here it is perhaps necessary to add that by 'participation of the users' we do not mean that the users should work at the drawing board or that they should dictate while the architects transcribe, transforming aspirations into images." [5]

Though being seemingly engaged, this literal interpretation of participation does not lend any real agency to the participants, robbing them of a chance to form any meaningful connection to their environment. De Carlo asserts that even if the users' best interests were taken into account, they would have little reason to defend or upkeep something they did not take part in. For participation to be genuine, it needs to be part of a longer process. This includes discovering the users needs, formulating a hypothesis and applying the information gathered in some way. These stages do not follow sequentially, but have a cyclical relationship. It became clear during the project that public participation as well as the entire park design is an iterative process.

As an iterative planning model, de Carlo discusses process planning. In opposition to the more commonly used authoritarian planning, process planning 'formulates a sequence of hypotheses aiming at (and launched by) participation'[6]. Process planning consults the users in various ways, questioning immediately the legitimacy of the constraints that would be imposed by the 'professionals' on resources and standards. Because we could not make any universal assumptions about the publics needs in Chercea, the project's goals were at once a design and an inquiry – a mode of further research. The only way to further understand the needs of the users, it was necessary to engage with them personally, moving from observation to interaction and back again. It is also important to note that de Carlo did not see process planning as ending at the construction of the architectural object, but being part of a broader continuum. As John Habraken also found, a design only provides the structure for the next stage of development. As a space that should meet and reflect the needs and desires of a community at the current moment, we felt it was not necessary to aim any final, fixed design for the park, but continue developing ways to work with the community.

3 Bishop, The Social Turn, Artforum February 2006, p. 183

4 Bishop, The Social Turn, Artforum February 2006, p. 183

5 De Carlo, Arcitecture and Participation, p. 16

6 De Carlo, Arcitecture and Participation, p. 19

spontaneous activity and football goals

tree planting workshop

seedbombing with color

Reflecting on the football goals as an intervention, a balance of freedom and control was achieved by defining boundaries for the participation. Despite being an overall more inclusive action in the park, the goals limited participation within a clearly defined framework. Their design was fixed and only their positioning was left open to interpretation. All in all, the adaptable architecture of the football goals facilitated engagement with the space lending it new meaning in the eyes of the local youth. The white square on the other hand was not participatory in any way – the entire intervention from design to execution was predefined. Even if others would have helped realize this intervention, the participation would have been only instrumental and placatory. Of all the actions carried out in the park, the square was the most deserving of criticism in its level of engagement. With no physical public input, nor a strong enough relevancy to the context, the square remained detached in meaning and function.

"What meaning does the built environment have for the inhabitants and the users, or the public or, more correctly, the various publics, since meanings, like the environments that communicate them, are culture specific and hence culturally variable?" [7]

Returning briefly back to perception and meaning, it is relevant to ask: who's meaning is being considered in the white square? The process of producing the square was clearly exclusive, but it should be noted that also its meaning largely eluded those who passed by it every day. In the meanwhile, this intervention was received well within our school, among other students and teachers. It became clear that the square was only significant within a specific culture – our 'northern European architectural culture'. The square's symbolism and function were understood among a select group of people in Norway, but could not be 'read' by those who lived next to it in Chercea. In the end, the square symbolized and enforced nothing more than a disjunction between our perception-based language and the more, perhaps association-based perspectives of Cherceans. By trying to change the locals' perceptions of the space, we also ended up changing *our* perceptions of our position in the neighborhood and more broadly, the architect's place in society.

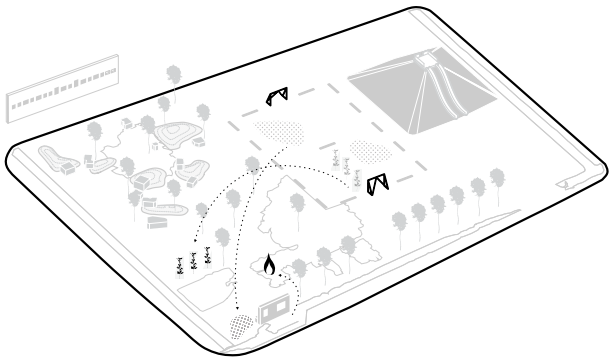
We needed to find ways of working with the space that were understood by us and the users equally. Being from two different backgrounds we did not always share the same systems of meaning. We also needed to find a way to meaningfully engage those who were interested in building the park with us. Reflecting on the merits and downfalls of the football goals and the white square later on, it becomes clear that meaning cannot be created from participation alone, an intervention should have relevance to those who use it. And no matter how relevant an intervention may be to its users, if they do not feel ownership, the meaning can be lost.

3.2.3

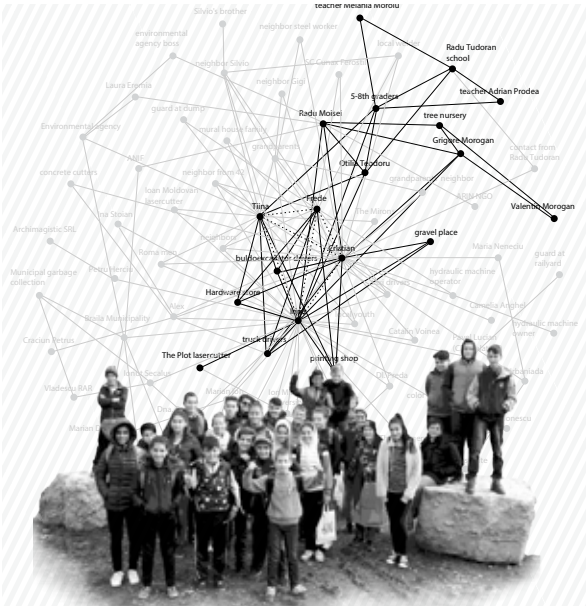
Fostering ownership, forming memories. We found that the park space became a type of medium through which we could engage in a dialogue with the local youth and older population. Participative, direct action in the park was a valuable method for us to establish a connection with the locals while simultaneously discovering new potentials for the space. The following description of two planting activities continues to reflect on engagement with context. The focus was on improving methods of engaging with the space through participation. Through these events, the park and our group became increasingly embedded in the social and material networks of the community.

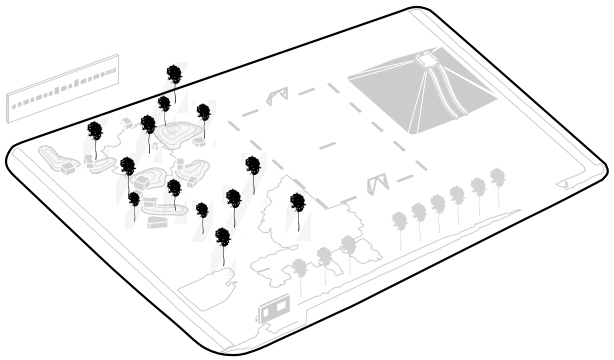
Looking back, working with vegetation formed a considerable part of the participative actions in the park. Planting, pruning and clearing around the site seemed the safest option for unplanned, unstructured and only partially supervised activity. It also provided a hands-on, low-threshold and instantly visible mode of involvement for the local youth. There were also a number of direct spatial benefits from this type of work, the most obvious being an improved appearance of the park that communicated a presence and some level of care. The park space was opened up visually to the street by thinning out a dense wall of vegetation on the East side, discouraging further littering and stray animals. By clearing the thick tangle of weeds on the North and East sides, a sidewalk was made usable again, drawing pedestrians from the road to walk next to the park instead. The visual accessibility and the physical affordances to enter the space and walk near it improved the safety of the park.

7 *Rapoport, The Meaning of the Built Environment, p. 20*

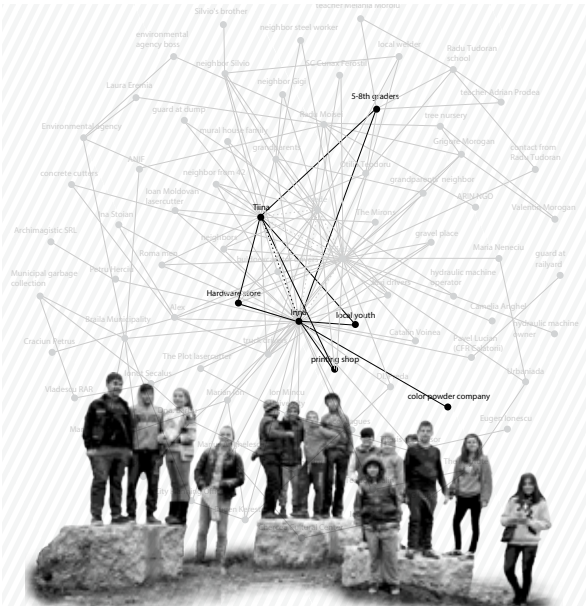


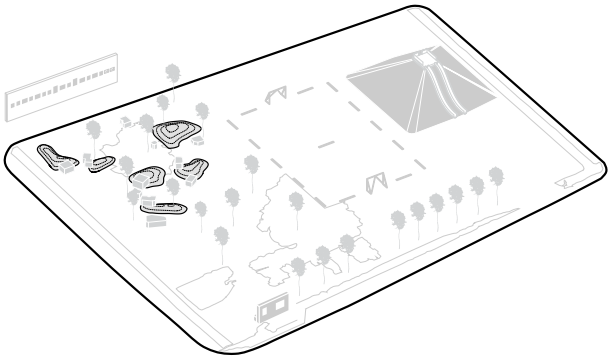
football goals and chain of actions





tree planting workshop





seedbombing with color

Our choice to take a stronger participatory approach in working with the park space was guided by the success of the football goal intervention and what was learned from the white square. The following workshops and events also form a series of inquiries, iteratively reaching for a better understanding of how to work in this specific material and social context. Applying what we learned from the previous interventions in these next actions is a form of process planning – where methodology holds equal importance to outcome and each stage informs the next.

Always the initiators, our level of engagement varied in each activity. In some cases we worked alongside the youth, helping or answering any questions on using tools, in the more structured workshop we engaged less in direct work, taking on a more organizational role. The first planting activity was the most hands-on and least structured, being a natural development from the football field. Control in this activity was not high: there was no 'supervision' and the youth did not feel like they are under any recognizable form of authority, the common objective to improve the space coming naturally, instead of being imposed from above. Still being seen as the adults of the group and the initiators though, we were approached with questions and suggestions every time there was a new decision to be made.

This first series of actions happened within a sparse material and social network. A few rakes, brooms and shovels were borrowed from the youth's families or bought for very little money at the local hardware store. Sometimes we would cross over the railway tracks to buy some orange soda and snacks for everyone. Since having convinced the youth that the goals were a communally owned entity, the rest of the gestures were accepted without further question.

Working with the vegetation was spontaneous. There was no prior warning, no posters or fliers. Information traveled by word-of-mouth, which turned out to be surprisingly effective mode of communication within the neighborhood. Though initially community life seemed non-existent in Chercea – high fences and private property were easily mistaken for a lack of social engagement – we understood later that the inhabitants were very aware of our actions in the park from day one. The young people – some even from outside of the neighborhood – came to help. For the duration of the project, we accommodated for anyone interested in helping us with the vegetation on the site, but we also tried another, more networked form of participation: a tree planting workshop held in collaboration with a local school and planting company.
As a form of more structured participation, the tree planting workshop existed in a more complex network of people and materials. The administrative body of the school, its principal, class teachers, the planting company, the nursery that donated the trees, key contact people and the thirty school children made up the social resources of the event. A mass of objects including diplomas of participation, posters, sign-up lists, lecture slides, gardening tools, donated and purchased trees, labels for the trees, diggers, concrete breaker, black earth and more constituted the suddenly complex material network.

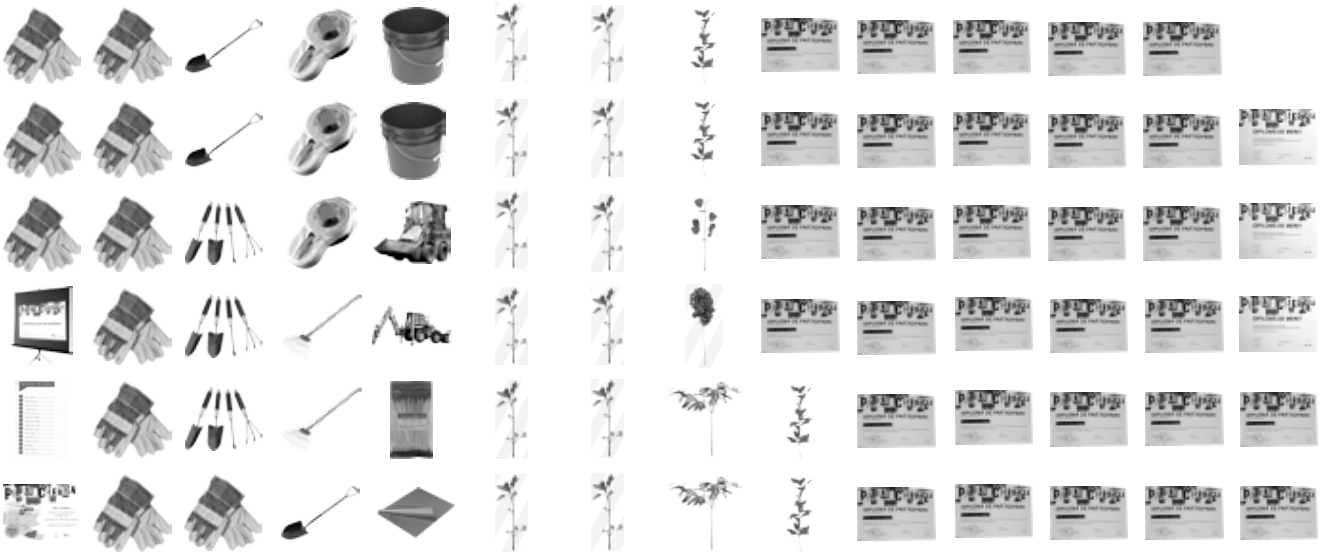
The workshop consisted of a short lecture during the daytime about our work in the park and general information about planting trees followed by an afternoon observing and taking part in the planting activities on site. The constant presence of the teachers and the initial lecture lent a strong pedagogical feel to the workshop. Working with an official entity like a school, the work carried out in the park became assimilated into their network, our activity forming a part of a school curriculum. This resulted in engaging in certain procedures such as printing sign-up lists, posters for communicating the workshop and diplomas of participation – stamped and signed – for each of the students participating. The work in the park now taking place under the rules of the school and the introduction of a system of rewards changed the nature of the participation to something more conditional, static. Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* criticizes the current school system for blurring the boundaries between learning and representations of learning:

"The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new." [8]

Iliich's thinking is relevant to reflecting on the shortcomings of the tree planting as a participative event. The importance of the diplomas in this activity was disproportionate to the

8 Illich, Deschooling Society, p. 3

football goals and chain of actions



tree planting workshop

seedbombing with color

Seedbombing with color event.

main objective of engaging with the space in a meaningful way. This immaterial value was replaced by a commodity: pieces of paper are easier to quantify than meaningful experience, the diplomas and school credits becoming the main objective for the participants instead of wanting to impact their surroundings from their own free will. In his work, Illich argues for taking control of learning by bringing it outside the classroom walls. In the case of the tree planting workshop, instead of facilitating a more liberated educational situation, we ended up extending the walls of the classroom to the park and skewing our objectives to demonstrate that citizens were in a position to improve shared, public spaces themselves and learn from experience and exploration.

On the other hand, organizing this workshop embedded the project into an established cultural structure – a commonly used tactic in engaging with local context. Temporary urbanism projects such as the Southwark Lido became part of a wider festival of architecture for instance. In the case of Parcul Chercea, we hoped that a collaboration with the local school would – along with demonstrate the basics of tree planting to young people – help the community view shaping public space as acceptable behavior. By involving a local actor, we handed over the authority of the space, distancing ourselves in an attempt to narrow the gap between the community and the park.

Afterwards, we heard that there would have been more than thirty students interested in participating in the workshop, but the school imposed a limit, citing difficulties to control groups too large. This was problematic considering the local perceptions of the space as off-limits and our work to open up the park to users again. Lists can create an air of exclusivity, as if only a select group of people had the right to be in an otherwise public space. Later on in the project, we overheard a rumor among the kids that only those who had signed their name onto some – now mythical – 'list' had the right to use the park. In our attempt to engage on a fuller extent with the community, the workshop may have in fact alienated some groups from the space. We also realized the space could potentially turn into a tool of exclusion between the different, competing groups of youth in the neighborhood.

To answer this issue, a semi-organized event was held the following week. Observing and learning from the reactions of the participants, this could be seen as the most successful of all the participative activities in creating not only engagement with the space, but with each other. The idea was to move away from a more dry instructive, top-down approach back to a more playful, though still educational one. The activity should also be constructive, directly shaping the park in some way or leaving a lasting impact. The activity of seedbombing was considered, but though throwing things is always fun, this was not an action that would be immediately visible. Being a landscape intervention, the results of the activity would not be visible until the next spring – a long time to wait. It would be more interesting if it would be immediately visible. Combining the seeds with some colored powder allowed us to engage the kids in building their own color bombs with grass and wildflower seeds while turning an otherwise useful activity into an immediately visible one.

Using the now established connection to the local school we took the opportunity to advertise the event in the same place as the previous week. We also put up posters around the park and told the kids who had become regular visitors to spread the word. Using the same logo as in the previous workshop, paired with a recognizable image of a color powder fight, we hoped to communicate the event quickly and clearly. The group of kids turned up that day was smaller than the organized workshop, but looking at their reactions and experiences, this activity was the most successful in terms of establishing positive memories of the space and interacting with each other.

Since the activity was not limited within a certain institution, but was open to anyone interested in joining, participation of children from multiple social groups was evident. The activity of throwing the color powder at each other seemed to break some barriers and tensions between them, while providing an efficient way to 'plant' the flower and grass seeds.

The level of control on the visual outcome of this intervention was intentionally low. Owing to the wild, overgrown nature of the site and the lack of future maintenance, it was decided to introduce hardy grass species and native wildflowers that could survive and

proliferate on their own. The seeds would add to a landscape that was less planned, more chance-based – it was an introduction of more friendly species into an existing, thorny landscape. The movement patterns of a color powder fight are by nature erratic, leaving a more 'natural' distribution of seeds on the ground than any intentional planting activity. Through the involvement of the public in this way, the alternative – participative – means of production led to an alternative aesthetic.

"It is too easy to dismiss these as "crude" or "dirty", because that just reinforces the standard architectural categories of refined and clean. Instead we should recognize that the products of participation have their own value system and are perhaps more relevant and appropriate to the democratic transformation of the built environment." [9]

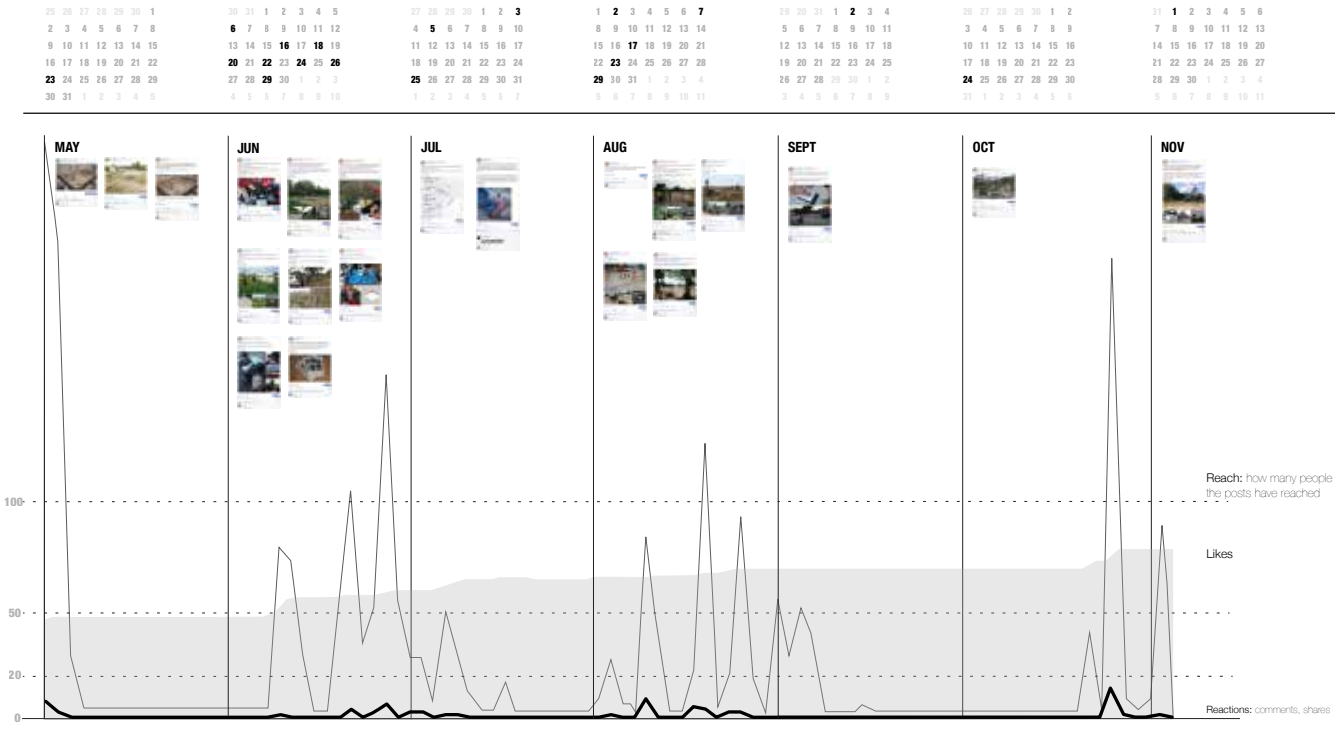
As with the football goals, the three participative planting activities – unstructured, structured and semi-structured – constitute inquiries into methods of social engagement as well as revealing spatial and social potentials. Some of the more successful events have shown that the aesthetic and the social do not need to be separated into different realms and that what is produced through participative action exists in a completely new – yet equal – value system alongside conventional architecture. Contextually engaged participative practices should be seen as a legitimate architectural practice and also a critical mode of self reflection within the profession. By engaging with the public through the various interventions, it was possible for us to identify some of our blindnesses. The lack of response to the white square within the neighborhood and the enthusiastic reception of the goals and the seedbombing with color allowed us to realize differences in perception between us and our public for instance.

While working within these various social networks, we used different modes of communication to reach the public. To supplement more traditional forms of communication, a Parcul Chercea facebook page was set up in the hopes of reaching a wider network of young people in Chercea. The page was used to publish the various activities on the site and communicate any changes in event timetables. Owing to its data collection features, it was also possible to track the reach of each post and other virtual activity our real-life activity generated. Our primary goal was always to reach the immediate community around the park through the project. Looking into the statistics of the facebook page though, the reach of the project was surprisingly wide, with clicks from individuals on the other side of the world. The virtual network around the project was much wider than the one in reality. Though the number of clicks can never replace the embodied experience of a place, Parcul Chercea had extended into a parallel, virtual 'place' with real 'visitors'.

How effective was this virtual network in engaging the local population though? Recently mainstream social media has made it possible to follow developments in architecture on a global scale, facilitating a greater public interest. These sites allow a single person to 'react' to projects by 'liking' or commenting for example, which creates a sense of engagement. Publications of projects such as the Southwark Lido in well-known design websites provide a comments section that act as an outlet for citizens to criticize, praise or share, often anonymously. Owing to their unregulated nature, these comment threads can reveal a more truthful image about the project than the article itself, though conversely a distorted one. They nonetheless offer an interesting insight on general, public opinion on projects. The overall accessible nature of the Internet has made information on architecture available to the public, and in this sense has contributed to the democratization of knowledge and opinion in the field. Particularly its option to 'react' to posts in various ways, digital and social media creates an illusion of engagement. Already before social media, The Situationists International argued mainstream media creates meaningless spectacle: media distances us from our lived reality and objectifies experience. Though they referred to traditional printed and broadcast media, the same holds true for social media, where the level of engagement remains cursory, superficial. The virtual network around the project does not stand for real, participative engagement and its broadness should be seen more as a curiosity than a value. It is actual participation – in time and space – that can 'provide a counterpoint to the image-fuelled world of the media.'[10] In Parcul Chercea, the emphasis on direct action instead of preordained images of what the space should look like challenges this fixation with the image in mainstream architectural culture.

9 *Blundell Jones, Petrescu, Till, Architecture and Participation, p. xv*

10 *Blundell Jones, Petrescu, Till, Architecture and Participation, p. xv*



post frequency & reactions

3.2.4

Reaching into collective memory. Initially meant to inform those living around the park of the project, our visits with neighbors turned into storytelling sessions about the park's history. Through informal, one-on-one conversations, we reached into a collective memory, leading us to a fuller understanding of the park's past. We began making visits with more consistency, hoping to gather as much knowledge about the space as possible. Once the attention turned to the place's past as a park, they began to describe – often in detail – each element that once made up the park. A clear pattern began to emerge in the conversations: the longer someone had lived near the park, the richer the descriptions usually were.

The mutual language barrier often compelled the storyteller to sketch out the individual playthings and their locations. Anecdotes about scratches, skirmishes and playthings were shared on paper when words were not enough. Sketching and verbal description accompanied by gestures, tone and expression all worked towards communicating a fuller picture of the park's lived experience. Sometimes, the discussions took place in people's backyards, sometimes in the space itself. When in the park, we would often walk with the narrator, stopping here and there, to contemplate the position of a long-gone water fountain or see-saw.

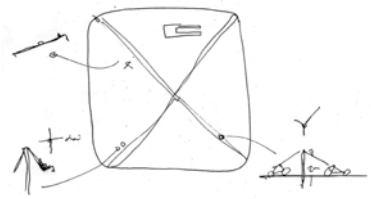
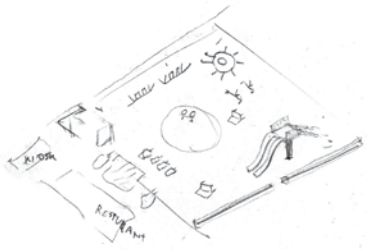
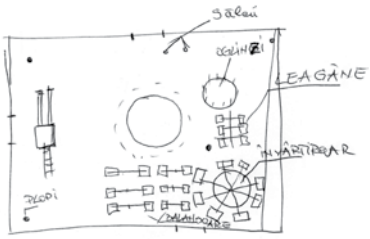
We did not intend to collect accurate historical data. After a dozen meetings it was possible to describe the major transitions of the park from just before the communist period began to today. Years cited varied somewhat, but it became clear that the park's decline began decades ago – its lease to a construction company about ten years back finally condemning it to obsolescence, removing its identity as a park completely. Despite their anecdotal nature, the sketches and their accompanying descriptions became a tool for understanding the development of the space from its original form as a park to the long-neglected wasteland we found upon arrival.

The participative activities described until now allowed the park's potential users to form ties to the space by producing new memories. These informal talks with the neighbors formed another, alternative type of participation. By engaging the older population, we broadened our network of relations as well as provided a comfortable way for those who did not want to come into the park to participate and interact. Informal talks were a valuable form of communication as well as a channel of knowledge in this project. As a way of involving locals who would not participate in the more public events, the memory sketch sessions provided a chance to build a rapport with the less visible inhabitants. The park was a concrete, tangible space that was a mutual topic of interest for the neighbors and us.

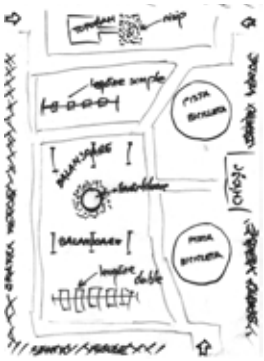
Through the stories, the space became 'politicized' to us, transforming all who had been involved in shaping it into protagonists and antagonists. The 'bad guy' railway construction firm, the few, 'good guy' neighbors who planted fruit trees along its western edge, braving the authorities and the depressing state of the neglected park. Working now with the space, we also became part of its story. My own impressions of who and what was good or bad changed: what I originally felt was destructive – burning garbage, dumping bricks and glass to the park – I saw now as a necessity brought on by circumstance. The storytelling sessions created empathy between us – the architects – and the local population. The contact with those living around the space changed my position on their actions, it gave them context.

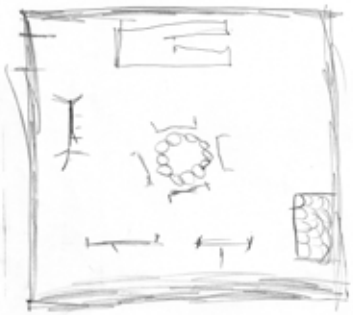
Each older individual had a story to tell about the merry-go-round or the slide. Tempered by time, dormant memories passed through the hand onto paper as an individual expression of the same space. The park elements remain recognizable even if the stories and their formal expression vary from person to person. Most have been drawn onto A4 sheets of paper, some into my notebook. The level of detail is not indicative of original size, rather a symptom of a lack of emotional and physical engagement with the space. A gradient in detail is visible: drawings of bulldozers and dogs told of a generation that had never seen it as a space of play. This collection of sketched memories revealed something about the space we could have only guessed at from its material reality alone. The previously desolate space took on a new meaning to us– us who had never even seen it as a park. We realized that this space was still a park, to those who remember.

The sketches were not initially intended as material for a mural – the idea to display them in any form came later in the project. What began as a form of communication






The park as Cherceans remember it. All sketches by local people.

and research into the park's history, led to a physical intervention. By transferring the sketches onto a blank wall facing the park, we were publicly representing singular memories while preserving a connection to the past. The documentation and publication of the park in its various stages offered some solace in the coming transformation into yet another version.

Great care was taken to preserve them as close to their original form as possible. No modifications to the drawings were made to preserve details and differences in personal expression. The sketches were enlarged digitally and transfered onto the untreated wall using stencils and white spray paint. The choice of leaving the wall as is engages in the continuum of the space: the passing of time had left layers of objects, markings and textures in the park, each potentially becoming a vessel for peoples' memories. The drawings form yet another layer of 'material', that hints at the past of the space. This new layer of memory sketches sits side by side with existing graffiti, reflecting the layered conditions of the site on a whole.

The arrangement of the drawings on the wall is non-hierarchical intentionally. Displaying them equally reveals the discontinuity in memories. Some drawings are rich in detail and others stand out in their barrenness, features of the landscape are highlighted that have an emotional resonance with the drawer. The empty spaces in some drawings tell a story of their own. The two exist next to each other uneasily, revealing a contrast between different generations' memories of the space.

"These refurbishments cause a few perplexed smiles and a certain amount of retrospective musing among older locals: for what they see projected at a distance is the place where they used to believe they lived from day to day, but which they are now being invited to see as a fragment of history. Spectators of themselves, tourists of the private, they can hardly be expected to blame nostalgia or tricks of memory for objectively evident changes to a space in which they still live, which is no longer the place where they used to live." [11]

In displaying openly these previously hidden landscapes of the mind, the people are compelled to engage in the passing of time and the history of place. The sketches revealed that despite the park's prolonged dereliction, the space and its past continues to exist in the community and should not be forgotten. The mural became a platform for trading memories – a blank canvas for sharing – and passing on stories about the space as a park then and now, grounding it in a continuum.

The park itself is a vessel for memories of the local residents, elements such as the old slide acting as a kind of anchor – a mnemonic – that a multitude of memories were fixed to. As the only remaining plaything from the old park, the crumbling slide in particular stands as a repository of collective memory.

"The named environment, familiar to all, furnishes material for common memories and symbols which bind the group together and allow them to communicate with one another. The landscape serves as a vast mnemonic system for the retention of group history and ideals." [12]

The memory sketches revealed how people used objects in the park space to center their stories on, they became an aid to memory. As the only surviving member of a collection of recreational equipment, the slide-relic also outlasted the construction company leasing the space. It had suffered erosion though: the metal staircase has long ago been taken for scrap metal, the concrete had crumbled to reveal reinforcements. The steep concrete slide sloping up to a small platform still provides an attractive climbing challenge, but with the removal of the stairs, any obvious functionality as a slide disappeared. Through weather and vandalism, the old slide slowly shifted towards strangeness, becoming an foreign object defined by a collection of material attributes instead of by an identity through its function.

Stripped of its obvious functionality and being the last remnant of the original park, it is tempting to think of the old slide as a monument to the park's past. But is it really similar to the conventional monuments found in public space? The original meaning of monument is a tangible expression of permanence or duration. Monuments work as a tool to think in terms of continuity through generations.

11 Augé, Non-Places, p. 45

12 Lynch, The Image of the City, p. 126

Sketching memories: the locations of past park elements generated discussion.

Transferring the memory sketches to the wall.

"The social space bristles with monuments – imposing stone buildings, discreet mud shrines – which may not be directly functional but give every individual the justified feeling that for the most part, they pre-existed him and will survive him. Strangely, it is a set of breaks and discontinuities in space that expresses the continuity in time." [13]

The slide expresses this continuity and at a height of 5,5 meters, it could be seen as an unintentional monument to the old park. It is the most identifiable feature of the space. During the memory sketch sessions, the distinctive form and position of the slide was often drawn first, acting as a point of orientation in an otherwise unspectacular square of land. Throughout time and in all cultures, strong features in the landscape become not only reference points, but also construct the identity of a place. Owing to its historical significance and its usefulness as an orientation device, we decided to preserve the slide.

From time to time a hopeful youth or older resident would approach us with a recommendation to knock down the slide. "What could stand in its place?", we asked. Young boys instantly dreamed up football stadiums, older folks thought of shopping malls. It was generally agreed that the slide was dangerous as it is. Stories of children falling off and being hospitalized were told. When pressed for details, no one knew more.

The old concrete slide seemed only to stand in the way of everyone's idea of progress. It represented failure and disappointment to those who had memories of the space as a park, and having seen its deterioration. To youth it represented the ever-present neglect and stagnation in the neighborhood, only adding to their want to escape . The gleam in the youths eyes when they shouted "demolition!" told of a thirst for something, maybe a spectacle, maybe a change, maybe anything.

Our viewpoint differed again from the locals and raised the question of the usefulness of preserving an object that tells a story of a place that no longer exists. Simultaneously it was the only identifiable feature of the park. A way to preserve the slide's identity as monument while simultaneously transforming it into a useful object needed to be found. Instead of modifying the slide, we decided to add material to it: using earth donated from a construction site in the north of the neighborhood, the slide was encased in a pyramid shape. The relatively steep, thirty seven degree slope offered a way to climb up safely, while keeping its height. The supporting structure of the slide has been hidden, but its presence in the space has been reinforced visually and functionally. By mummifying a steadily deteriorating object in earth the slide has been transformed into an object of use again, without compromising its position as a landmark – it has been turned into a monument for play.

3.2.5

Adaptability through indeterminacy. Considering the levels of engagement in the project, how could we foster connections to the space once we are gone? Positive, productive indeterminacy of space and design has been discussed by Habraken – especially in the context of housing, but also in relation to vernacular architecture. He suggested facilitating future appropriation through designing typologically, not through prescribing specific functions or names. What was the function of the pyramid? Apart from preserving the slide and making it safer, the uses of the structure were open to interpretation. Because of its shape, the pyramid is highly legible in its environment, unlike the boulders and forest. It serves as a beacon, a landmark, most identifiable feature of the park, a way by which people orientate themselves in the space. After this, the interpretation is open. Taking queues from our context – the neighborhood – the design follows principles indeterminacy, bricolage and open-ended design as opposed to explicit, predetermined activities.

"A landscape whose every rock tells a story may make difficult the creation of fresh stories. Although this may not seem to be an issue in our present urban chaos, yet it indicates that what we seek is not a final but an open-ended order, capable of continuous further development." [14]

By coincidence, Lynch's quote refers to rocks, but the reference is fitting: while the boulders on the south-east corner of the park address the need for seating in the space, they can also act as much more. Choosing the south east corner for more free-form seating is based on our observations of how the first seating arrangement

13 *Augé, Non Places, p. 49*

14 *Lynch, The Image of the City, p. 6*

The pyramid in Autumn 2016, before the grass cover.

The back of the pyramid.

at the entrance was used. The low benches seem surprisingly empty most of the time, with only groups of teens and children gathering there once in a while. Many older residents said they were unable to sit because of their low height and no backrest. The corner may have been an active meeting place, but its central and visible location had an exposed feeling to it, which we discovered did not encourage hanging out or resting. The corner remained a place for quick chats between pedestrians, so we decided to introduce a more restful, secluded area on the corner of the park. From this tree-lined position, it was possible to observe the rest of the park, yet remain relatively invisible from the street.

The choice of material for the seating is based on our observations of the neighborhood. It favors robustness: addressing the need for seating while keeping in mind the tendency for taking apart furnishings in public spaces for firewood and scrap metal in the neighborhood. In Chercea, there is a subtle, constant shifting of materials on a daily basis. Public space is viewed as a free ground to practice this. Reinforcements are extracted from crumbling industrial buildings and sold for scrap metal, again transforming into some new, unknown object; wood is collected and burned to warm homes in winter months; bags a garbage are picked through by stray animals, the last scraps of food providing energy to survive another day. Looking around the neighborhood, we can learn from the materials that are left. Concrete cannot be easily recycled or sold, only smaller pieces are pushed around for ad-hoc seating. Plastic is everywhere, but in such a damaged state, reuse is practically impossible.

Moving the boulders from a peripheral position to a central one revealed the latent potential of these forgotten objects. Various searches through abandoned areas on the peripheries of the neighborhood finally brought up these 11 large, concrete pieces sitting in a field. This intervention is rooted in both resource and social sustainability by addressing reuse and re-identification of an object through repositioning. The identity of the boulders was shifted from junk to seating by relocation and specific treatment: the boulders' top surfaces were polished to a smooth terrazzo finish to add comfort of use as well as visual appeal. Though still not identifiable as seating, they could be used as such. The visual impact of the terrazzo finish was less about making them 'pretty' – though they looked better as well – but more to communicate a level of care that has been applied to them, discouraging vandalism. A small, detail oriented action like this can add the necessary dignity and identity to what was previously considered 'waste' by most.

The boulders' spacing into loose clusters and their orientation is social, while giving people the choice to sit alone. Both the nondescript form and 'openness' of the arrangement of the boulders encourages appropriation for different uses and meanings to its users. During our stay in Chercea, they were already used for taking photos, as a picnic bench, as a table to gather around or serve food and to stand on in group photos.

"Hasn't this always been here?" was a question one youth asked. Instead of going for a more formalistic language, the landscape plan has seemingly random groupings of trees and boulders amidst mounds of earth that will host tall grasses in the spring/summer. As no clear grid or shape can be made out in the arrangement, the boulders and trees stand out the least. The trees were planted in a random configuration for a reason: in case some do not survive, it will not compromise the overall appearance. Instead of visually announcing itself like the pyramid or football goals – underlining its novelty – this intervention offers purely a function: a place to sit and enjoy a little enclosure in an otherwise open space.

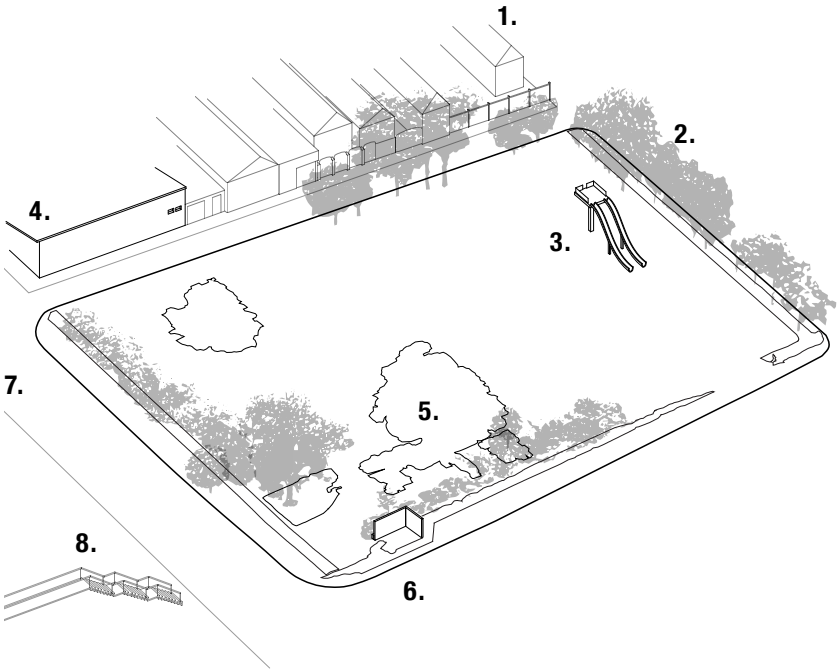
"Haven't these always been here?" Boulders as an alternative seating arrangement for the park.

Found in a field.

Bonfire event. Boulders acting as tables and seating.

Terrazzo finish.

OBSERVING



1. neighbors
sharing stories, sketching memories of the old park

2. edges
people drawn to shade of trees, dense weeds encourage littering

3. concrete slide
children still play on this relic of the parks' past

4. blank wall
encourages random tags

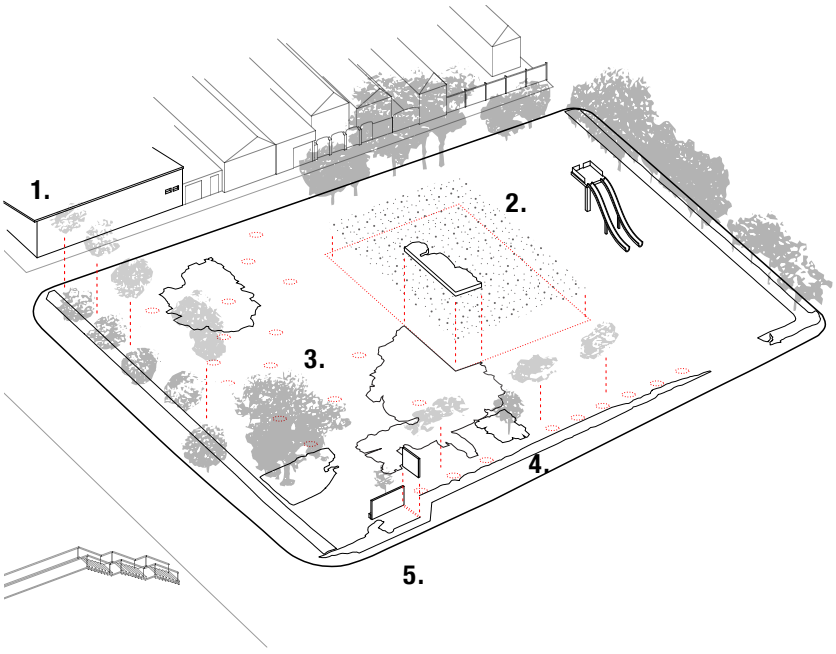
5. surface
reinforced concrete left over from industry

6. kiosk ruin
obstructs sidewalk, full of construction waste

7. surrounding streets
children choose to play here instead

8. railway overpass
one of the few entrances into the neighborhood

CLEANING



1. existing vegetation
line of trees thinned by removing or pruning

2. football field
prepared by removing rubble and concrete

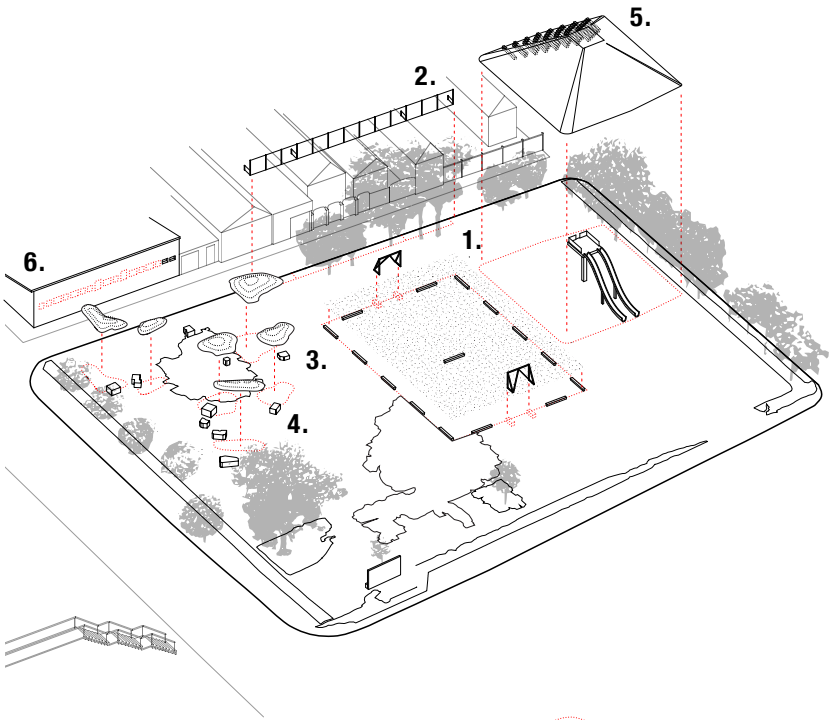
3. holes
breaking through concrete and digging to make way for new trees

4. edges
sidewalk cleared of vegetation and garbage

5. kiosk
obstructing wall removed

All transformations in Parcul Chercea by category.

CONSTRUCTING



1. football field
railway ties define border, concrete foundation for gates, gravel for leveling

2. steel fence
protects neighbor's yards, marks garden plots

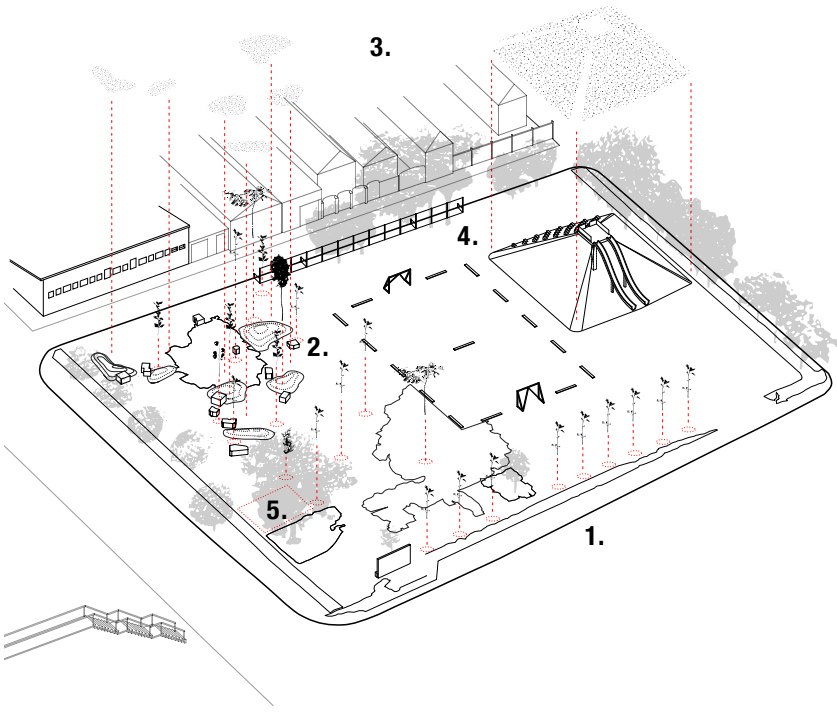
3. concrete stones
large enough to sit on or use use as a table

4. black earth
covers bare concrete around the stones

5. pyramid
slide encased in layers of earth, geotextile and railway ties

6. mural
memory sketches transferred onto the wall

PLANTING



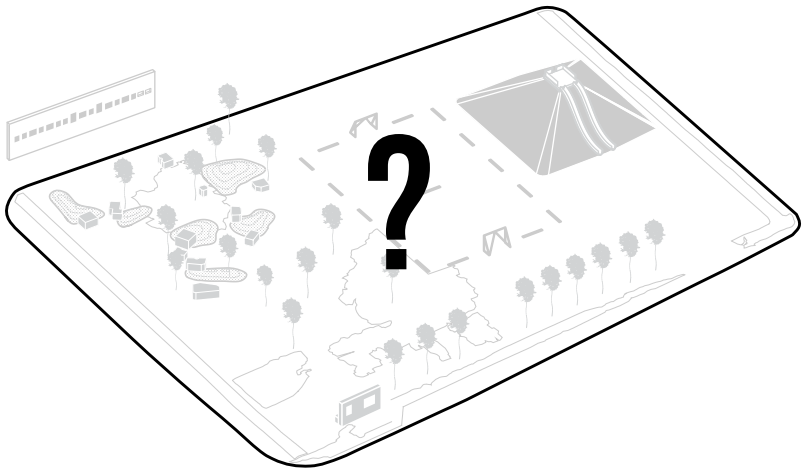
1. edge
new row of trees creates enclosure for the park

2. trees
address the need for shade in the park

3. planting seeds
grass and wildflowers will grow on the pyramid and around stones

4. fence + garden
small plots used freely by neighbors, steel mesh supports climbing plants

5. entrance garden
area of black earth for free appropriation



3.3

Leaving traces.

Our journey in the project began with searching for traces of the social in the material – a method conditioned by our initial cultural, linguistic and geographical distance from the Chercea. As we spent time looking further and following sometimes absurd or uncertain 'leads', surprising, latent social potentials and material abundance were revealed. Essential to the discovery of these was time: spending a total of two and a half months in the neighborhood, living and working. By slowly piecing together stories, anecdotes and fragments of information over a stretch of time, we learned the space's unofficial, unspoken history, becoming aware of its significance to those who lived around it. By working with the space directly and using it as a medium for communication, we were able to develop ways of engaging with the space and the community in a meaningful manner, learning more about the neighborhood and its people as the project progressed.

The results of the project can be divided into two, equally significant categories: method and design. In the case of this project, the methods used to work with the space are integral to the concrete outcome – a design that admittedly lacks a 'wow' effect. This does not mean that we did not consider the appearance of each intervention and their combined effect on the park space – on the contrary. In line with the context specific approach that was present from the start of the project, we accepted the naturally occurring rough aesthetic as an honest reflection of the process and place. It was also exciting to see how alternative methods of understanding a place and engaging with it could lead to alternative aesthetics. In some cases the interventions are basic typologically, such as the pyramid – in other cases it is difficult to remember the space without them. One resident seemed surprised that the boulders had just recently been moved to the park, thinking they had always been there. The 'everyday' aesthetic of the park shifts the focus of the work, bringing to the forefront the processes *behind* each intervention and action. Understanding methods to achieve a more engaged architecture and the immaterial values of this has been the main focus of the thesis.

Architecture, slowed down. The value of this project cannot be measured on its efficiency. The process of developing observational and participatory methods to draw out information about the space along with using this information to better answer the needs of the residents constitute an unconventionally slow process in architecture. Without the time spent on or around the site though, this project would not have had the same outcome. In some ways, this thesis is a way to understand the values of 'slow architecture' as a method, which is essentially the practice of engaging with both the social and material in a cyclical, iterative process over time. Doing things slowly – studying traces, engaging with community – are not ends in themselves though. They are a means to anchor the project into a continuum and most importantly produce something relevant to the users.

Having its beginnings in a school project, we had time to explore alternative, place-specific methods of architectural production. This is a luxury rarely afforded to architects in mainstream industry today. As outlined in the beginning of the thesis, there has been a steady stream of criticism towards the disengaged methods of traditional architectural practice for most of the twentieth and now twenty first centuries. Reading through the early criticisms towards modernism and observing the increase of real-life examples of experimental architecture today, it becomes clear that the search for alternative methods has not ended. The number of projects tackling questions on social engagement, context specificity and temporary uses has increased considerably, yet the methods they employ remain marginal, and relatively small in scale. Whereas it may not be necessary to apply such a slow process to all projects, a more engaged architecture and longer time-span can be a valuable method when developing public, social spaces. A 'slow architecture' approach stands in stark opposition to the sometimes aggressive, speedy developments happening in cities today. Examples of temporary uses such as Exzyst's Southwark Lido consciously engage with the space as part of a continuum, marking only one phase in the 'life' of the space. Financial gain is not a priority in these projects and may as a result always remain a marginal practice. Perhaps these experimental projects remain marginal also because when truly working to make something context specific, there is no ready-made fixed formula. What makes these projects time consuming is the need to start from the very beginning: to understand the specific needs of a specific area.

A socially sensitive and engaged architecture was particularly important in a country that has a complex history and relationship with public space. The mass systematizations during the Communist era wiped away spaces and structures that stood as monuments to national identity, replaced with public space devoid of rootedness – acting as a stage set for an ideology. The state taking complete control of public space and later abandoning it to private development led to passive attitudes among citizens towards shared, urban space. The lack of engagement with public space was furthered by Romanians' complicated relationship with volunteer work is a remnant from the forced community labor of the Communist era. When introducing participatory design practices the question of how to navigate complex motives and relationships between initiator and participant are at the forefront.

Despite taking a more secondary role in these participatory events, we were more actively engaged in the context than we would be through conventional observation methods or imposing some fixed final design. Here, the design of the park was not centered around any architectural objects, but more people's relationships with the space. In the project, creating conditions through which meaningful connections to the space could be formed was of equal importance to any designs for the space. As architects, we were able to apply the same 'design thinking' that has in the past disengaged people from their surroundings to re-engaging the inhabitants of Chercea with a forgotten space.

Currently, architects are given little education on working more directly with their contexts. Only through an extended period of time and plenty of reflection were we able to arrive at certain methods of engagement with the social and material conditions in the neighborhood. Perhaps some of this knowledge could have been gathered more efficiently if there were some established methods within the profession, but on the contrary, any set formulas for viewing our vastly different environments may only be misleading. Here lies the danger of drawing any overarching conclusions or formulating rules for

approaching context or design: they may do more harm than good if applied uncritically. The argument is not for architects to study all social and cultural systems, ecology or world history at once, but to have the means and the chance to thoroughly understand the specific features and issues of each context they work in. Reflecting on the process of the project, it is safe to say that time was an essential ingredient to reaching a fuller understanding of context.

3.3.2

Various indeterminacies. Two themes run hand-in-hand through the thesis: context specificity, and productive indeterminacy. Architects in the past – for instance during modernism – have tried to exert and maintain levels of control on the physical environment that border on the extreme. In a series of leaps and jumps, the profession has gradually shifted towards a more free, open-ended approach to the production of architecture and space.

Giancarlo de Carlo along with members of Team Ten challenged architectural modes of production calling for alternatives in method, followed by alternative aesthetics. Wildscapes as indeterminate territories in highly urban environments such as Berlin have been explored and praised for their 'semantic emptiness'. Ruoppila and Lehtovuori write about 'development orientation' of temporary urbanism and under-defined urban spaces creating a type of experiential indeterminacy. The productive uses of uncertainty in future appropriations and design processes are explored by Klaske Havik, Véronique Patteeuw and Hans Teerds in the OASE editorial *Productive Uncertainty*. John Habraken explored various modes of indeterminacy, including the use of typological form in vernacular architecture and translating the 'support and infill' concept to concrete building technology. The Situationists International used urban street space as a laboratory to search for a formula to the authentic, spontaneous and unitary urban life. The syndicalists – in Avermaete's description on the counter-reaction to modernism – searched for more engaged architecture, being drawn to the less contrived tabula rasa conditions of colonial Morocco – yet untouched by Western modernist traditions.

These examples reveal the positive, productive value of indeterminacy, but also the broad range of different types of indeterminacies. Engaging with the public always adds an aspect of indeterminacy that has found multiple levels from token participation to full control to the public. We took the freedom to explore these methodological and spatial and design-based indeterminacies during the project.

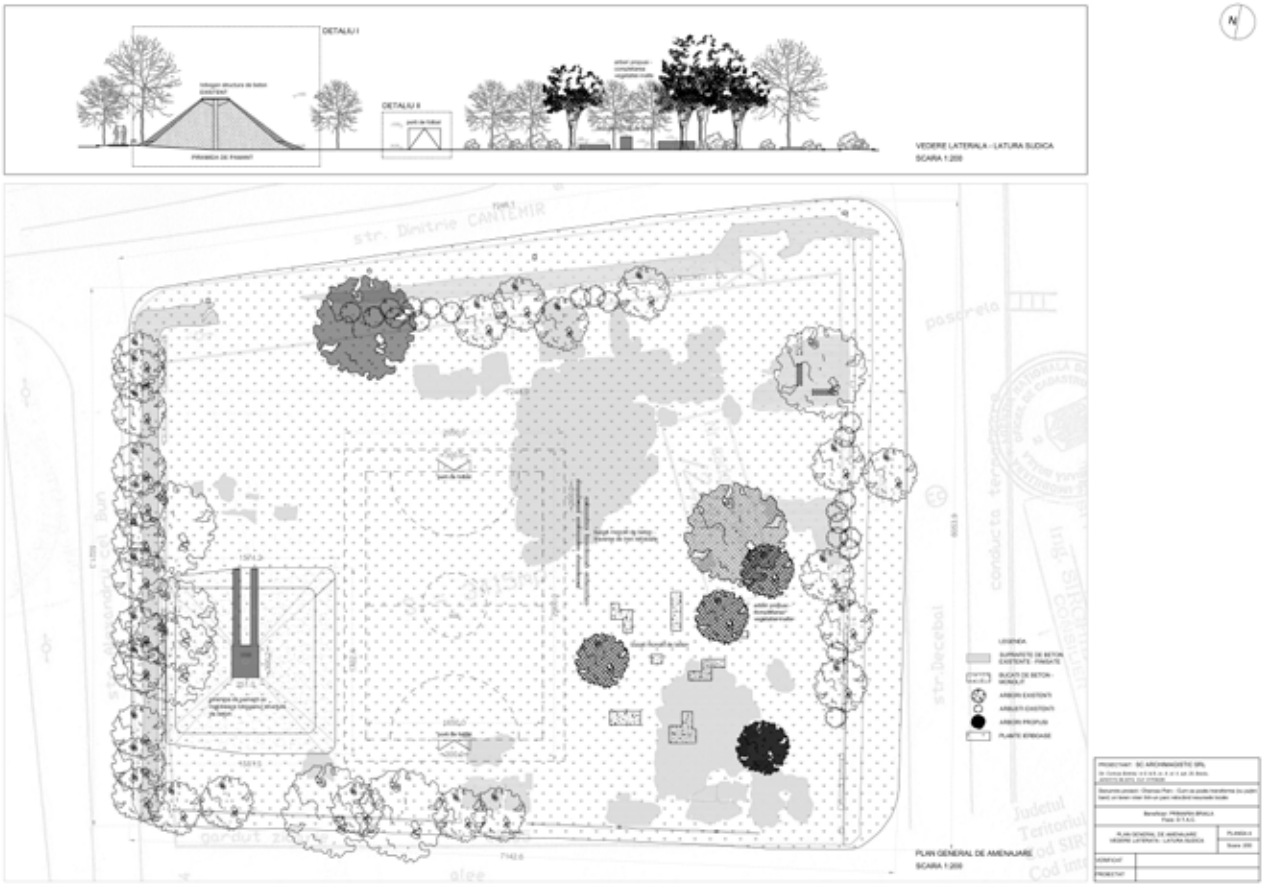
Marc Augé speaks about another type of indeterminacy – non-places – discussed briefly in conjunction with identity-less commercial developments and the disintegration of public space. Whereas spaces of indeterminacy have an identity of 'left over', forgotten and unwanted, they remain firmly anchored in an existing context. Non-places in Augé describes spaces with no identity, history or relationship to its surroundings – spaces that are certainly indeterminate, but not evocative. As a counterpoint to these identity-less spaces, Augé speaks about anthropological place. It is both a concrete and symbolic construction of space holding meaning for the people who live in it and those who observe it. He contrasts it to the non-places – airports, taxis, hotel lobbies – that are so pervasive in today's urban environments. Augé describes three characteristics present in anthropological place: identity, relations and history.

"'Anthropological place' is formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how; non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers." [15]

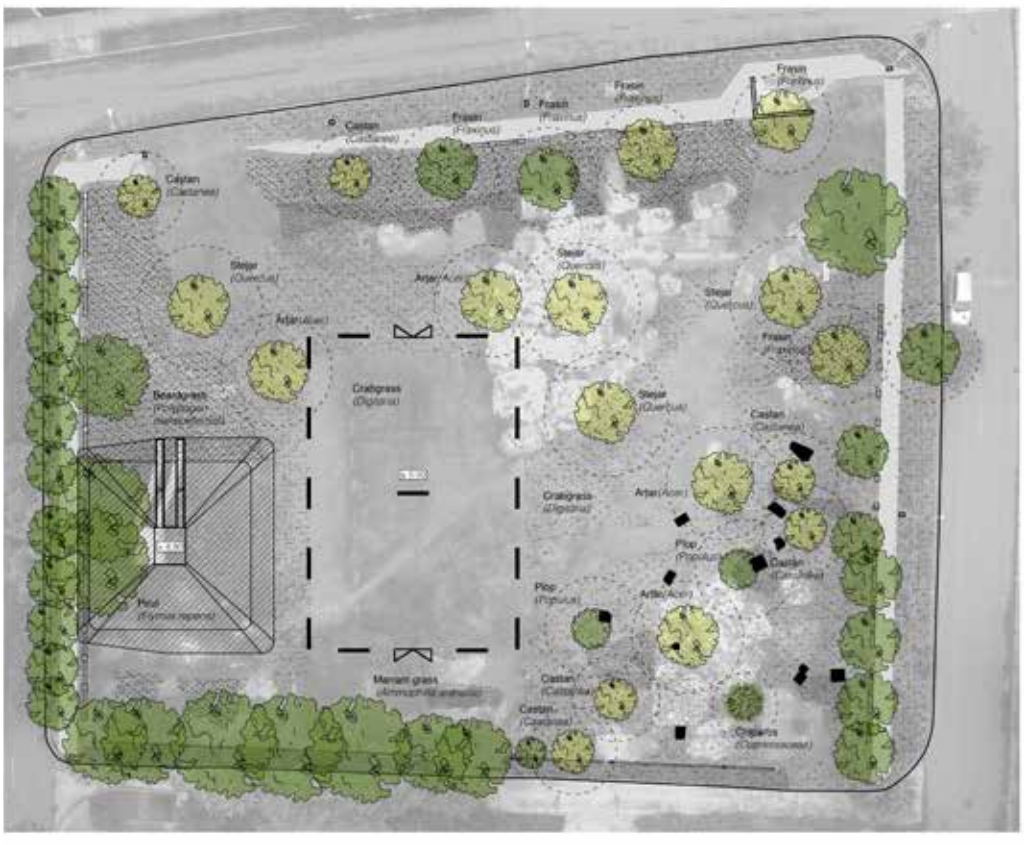
In Romania, Communism played a large part in creating spaces devoid of history, razing the past and imposing a new, homogeneous identity that was represented through the architecture of that time. Augé's work, and historical developments such as Communism demonstrate the interrelatedness of the social and material realms. The types of environments we live in impact our identities profoundly and likewise, our environments are reflections of our socio-cultural and geographic environments.

The space we originally gravitated towards – the forgotten park and its surrounding neighborhood – embodies many of the qualities that come with the types of indeterminacy already mentioned. Before discovering the values of indeterminacy though, we were forced to engage with this

15 Augé, Non-Places, p. 81



plan for construction permit, original scale 1:200, paper size A2



TREES PLANTED

1 Frasin (*Fraxinus*)
4 Stejar (*Quercus*)
4 Artar (*Acer*)
6 Castan (*Castanea*)

TREES PRUNED

3 Mulberry (*Morus*)
4 Frasin (*Fraxinus*)

TREES CUT

3 Mulberry (*Morus*)

GRASSES PLANTED

Maram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*)	HIGH
Beardgrass (*Polypogon manspeliensis*)	MEDIUM
Pin (*Elymus repens*)	MEDIUM
Crabgrass (*Digitaria*)	LOW

plan for landscape permit, original scale 1:200, paper size A2

notion on a very basic, fundamental level. Working in a context like Brăila we were confronted by the limits of our knowledge and the methods used to acquire knowledge.

Designing something context specific, yet undefined seems like a paradox. I would argue that it is exactly the indeterminate that affords specificity. More precisely, it is leaving parts tactically undefined that facilitate diverse future appropriations and invite future spatial developments. A specific knowledge of the context is nonetheless necessary to define exactly what type of indeterminacy and where.

3.3.3

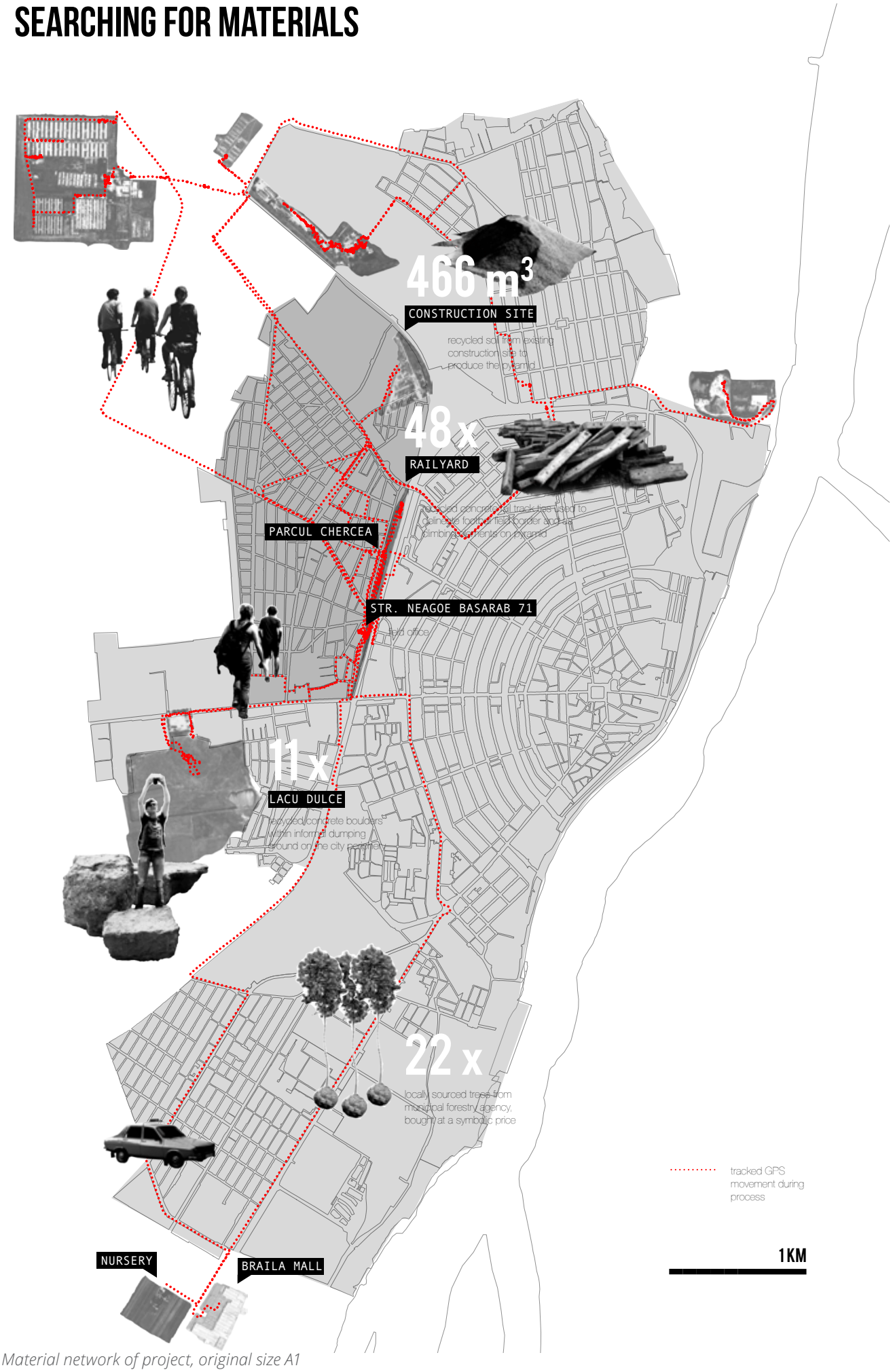
Whose park? From the start, we accepted that after leaving Chercea, there would be little we could do to impact the use of the park or influence its development. We had not managed to involve the city in adding the space to their public spaces maintenance schedule or contributing to the project materially. Their role during the process had been mainly to accept the preliminary permits for the park's construction, landscape and a specific structural application for the pyramid. Apart from a few isolated individuals, the city official's attitudes were bemused or lackluster towards the project. It felt as if we were seen as eccentric 'losers', moving around rocks and dirt in a peripheral neighborhood. The future of the park was just another indeterminate factor, and it seemed that not much would change quickly in the life of the space. If change happened, this would most likely be from independent actors, coming from outside of city administration. The ownership of the park we felt was completely with the local residents who had been involved with the project. Only a few months after the project concluded, these thoughts on the future of the park were proven wrong.

The newly-elected mayor of Brăila had visited the park with officials and deemed most parts of it unsafe for a children's playground. The mayor demanded that the park – at least in part – be demolished. Following a brief meeting with the city architect, a representative from our group and the mayor himself, it seems that the football goals will remain, with some improvements to the field, but the pyramid and boulders were a safety issue. Interestingly, the mayor defined the park as a children's playground, though this was never defined as such by us on the application documents. It had always been a community space, reflecting the needs all users of all age groups.

What could trigger such a strong response from the mayor on a project previously shrugged at by other officials? Safety is a real concern in the neighborhood on a whole. Upon hearing the news of the possible demolition of the park, it was difficult not to get angry though. Where was the mayor when the park lay covered in broken glass and construction waste for over a decade? What about stray dogs, attacking people on the streets at night in the neighborhood? What about the piles of household waste and dead animals littering the peripheries of the neighborhood? There is an abundance of safety issues the mayor could address. Citing concerns for the safety of a slide that is now decidedly safer or criticizing sharp edges on boulders weighed strangely against the extreme conditions Cherceans live in daily. This is not a criticism of raising safety concerns: it is right to question the overall safety of the park, which we aimed to make as safe as possible with the means available to us. Lighting, better surface materials, and regular landscape maintenance would further improve the safety and accessibility of the space, but were beyond our means at the time. The criticism here is the mayor's intense focus on a recently improved space in a context fraught with pressing safety issues stemming from a lack of basic services such as regular garbage collection. Viewing the mayor's comments in this wider context, the question of ulterior motives inevitably comes to mind.

The mayor's actions can be seen to reflect a classic tendency in human-architecture relations: those in positions of authority manipulate the built environment as a display of power. This phenomenon reveals that architecture and our built environment are inescapably political. Especially in the case of the park – a very public, visible location – the mayor is demonstrating his position by making extreme changes to it, or even making the new improvements disappear. Though it is far from the extreme actions of Ceausescu and the communist state in the last century, mass demolitions of public space and historical monuments acted as displays of power, ways to influence the public through the built environment. Exerting influence over the physical make-up of the park is a way for the mayor to assert his position and impose a

SEARCHING FOR MATERIALS



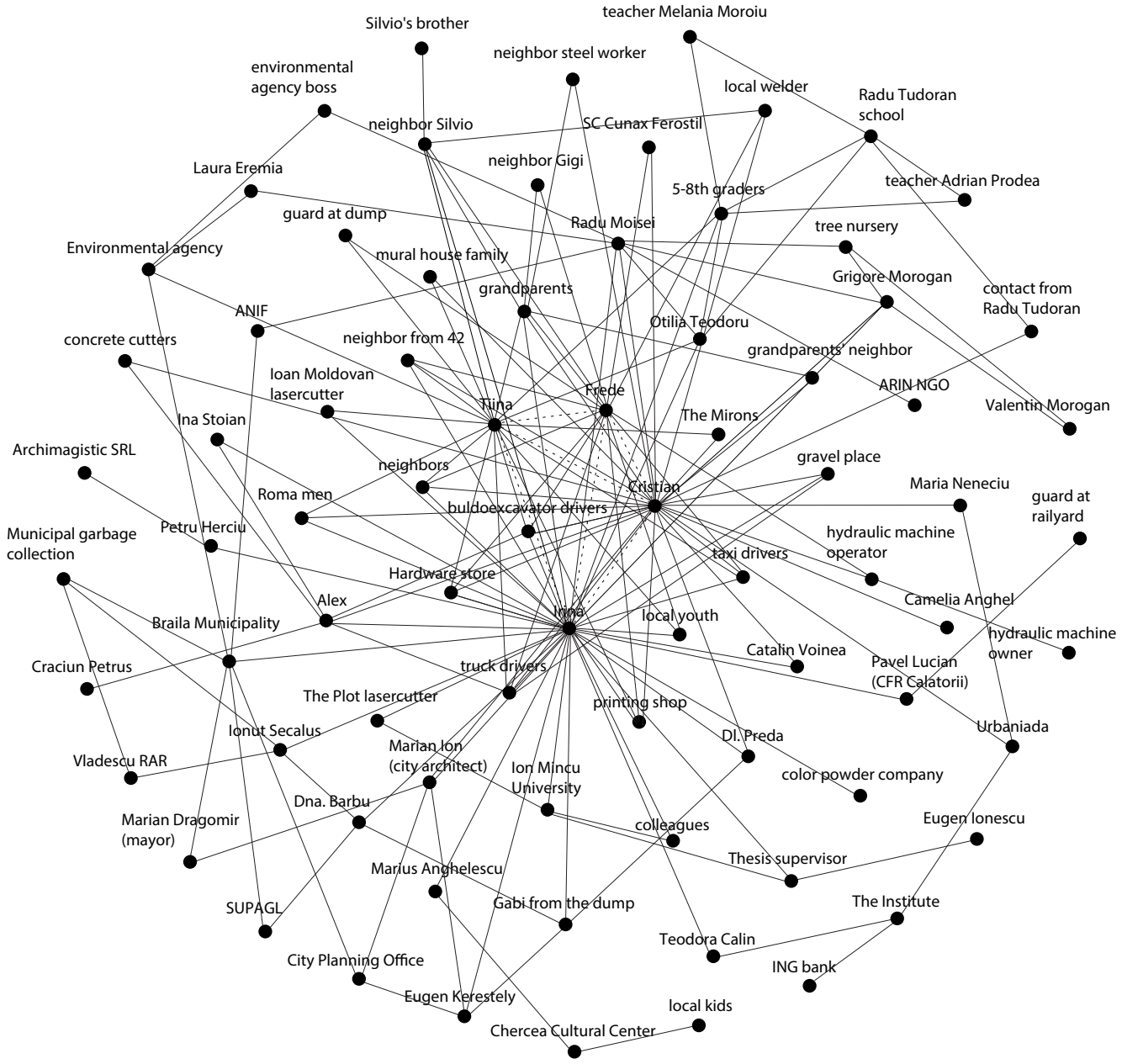
Material network of project, original size A1

different value system.

The action of demolishing is demonstrative in itself, but what makes it more explicit is the mayor's statement of 'showing' us how a real park is made. This reactive stance gives the mayor's action a competitive aspect, turning the space into a type of arena where notions of a 'good' park and public space are displayed. Instead of working with the surrounding community or us, or referencing the context, the mayor will build a more 'traditional' park, that communicates values that perhaps will not fit with those of the neighborhood. The insistence on a more traditional park raises concerns on its longevity though. The specific material and social conditions of the neighborhood gave rise to the particular interventions in the park. We understand the aesthetic and comfort values of standard issue benches – amenities found in other, less peripheral parts of the city, but we recognized the very real risks of providing such fixtures. These wooden and wrought iron benches and garbage cans will most likely be dismantled for scrap material – leaving us where we began. Opting for low-cost, low-maintenance and multi-functionality in the design produced unorthodox solutions, but a longer lasting effect. If a new park using metal, plastic and wood is built, there is a real risk of it losing its value and functionality quickly.

The involvement of the mayor can therefore be seen as a display of power, giving the park space a new, more political identity. As seen in the first two parts of the thesis, architecture is becoming increasingly influenced by actors outside of the architectural profession. During the communist era in Romania, the state took complete control of the profession. Today's cities are in turn molded largely my developers. The counter-reaction to modernism beginning in the 1950s brought a small group of architects aiming to work more independently of those in power, directly with those who needed their services. Though their aspirations are admirable and pioneering in the field, today the architect should not isolate themselves from existing networks of power. In the case of Exyzt's Southwark Lido, the architects embedded the project into an existing architectural festival, working closely with its organizers. In the case of Parcul Chercea, our relationship as architects with the city lacked a collaborative foundation from the beginning. It is only speculation, but perhaps this reveals a stark disjunction between our value systems and theirs. What we think is a good park for Chercea does not fit with their idea of a good park.

Whose park is Parcul Chercea? Thinking about this new turn of events further, there is a twofold value in the mayor's reaction. If the park is demolished, a new – though different – park will nevertheless take its place. The material amenities of the space have therefore been improved regardless, both through our actions and through the actions of someone who wants to improve the space according to their standards. If possible, the replacement park should be ensured by some type of written contract or a verbal, public declaration by the mayor, involving the local population again. Secondly, the mayor's strong reaction reveals that our initial attempt to draw attention to a neglected park has worked to a degree initially unimaginable. It has not only brought the space, and the peripheral neighborhood to the attention of city officials, it has also created a discussion around the best uses for this space. This owes itself at least in part to the unconventional methods and appearance of the park. While we were not able to gain the attention or support of the city through verbal persuasion, the design of the park proved to be enough provocation for the mayor to step in and personally see the space improved. The interventions can thus be seen as a framework of provocation – challenging those who disagree to improve the space to fit their standards. In conclusion, strong reactions – even negative ones – should not be taken as discouragement: as long as there are reactions, it indicates care and *this* is engagement through architecture.



Social network: all actors and their connections in Parcul Chercea.

EXHIBITION MATERIAL

ENGAGING THE SOCIAL AND MATERIAL –

FOOTBALL FIELD & CHAIN OF ACTIVITIES

Open, recreational spaces to play football were scarce in the neighborhood. Games were commonly played in the streets – the only hard, flat surfaces around. To test the **latent potential** of the park, lightweight temporary football goals were fabricated out of wood and placed in the space and their movable nature allowed youth to experiment with different configurations for the field. The visible nature of the goals drew the interest of both passersby and the youth, becoming a tool for communication between us and the locals through direct action and play. The introduction of the goals triggered a chain of further **participative, spontaneous** improvements in the park generating social momentum and changing perceptions from a previously neglected space to one of opportunity.

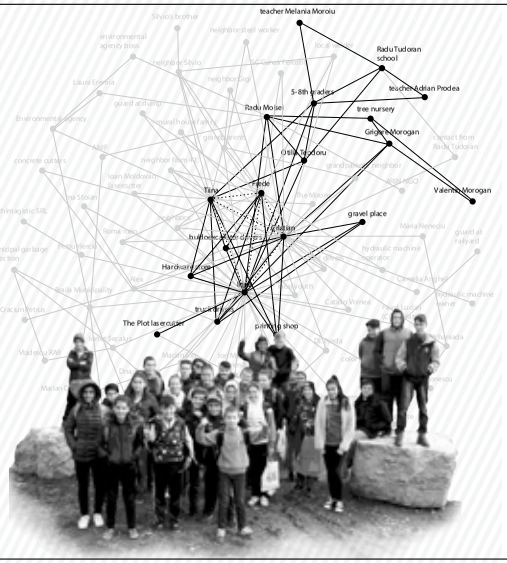
TREE PLANTING WORKSHOP

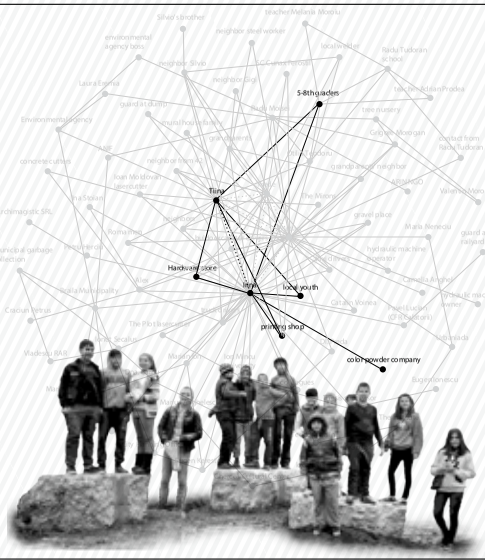
A forest of trees was constructed in **collaboration** with Radu Tudoran – a nearby school – and a municipal forestry agency. As the trees and vegetation grow, this will become an area where trees, grasses and wildflowers intertwine with large boulders acting as seating to form a sheltered resting area. A half-day **educational** workshop began with a lecture followed by a chance to partake in tree planting and labeling activities in the park. Most of the trees were donated by a nursery in the south of the city. By involving established institutions within the community such as the school, the park and its activities became **embedded into an existing network**, helping form ties between the community and the space.

'SEEDBOMBING WITH COLOR'

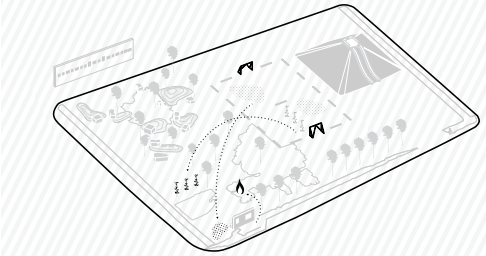
To plant grass and wildflower seeds, a cross between seedbombing and a color powder fight was organized in the same area following the tree planting workshop. Bags of color powder, wildflower and grass seeds were provided as materials for the do-it-yourself seedbombs. Less organized than the tree planting workshop, this event **combined play and utility** – engaging kids in a fun activity while getting the seeds planted around the future forest. As a landscape intervention, the outcome will only be visible the following spring, but the color powder gave it an immediate visual impact. As a less controlled and supervised event, the kids were able to freely express themselves and play, forming **memories** and further **changing perceptions** of the previously neglected space.

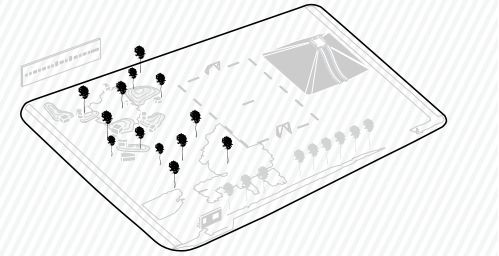
COMMUNITY

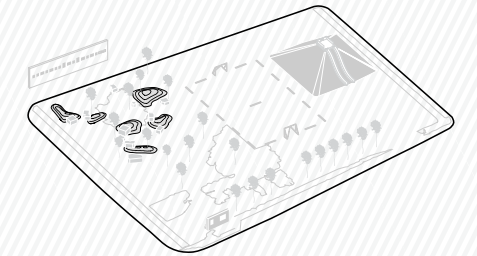




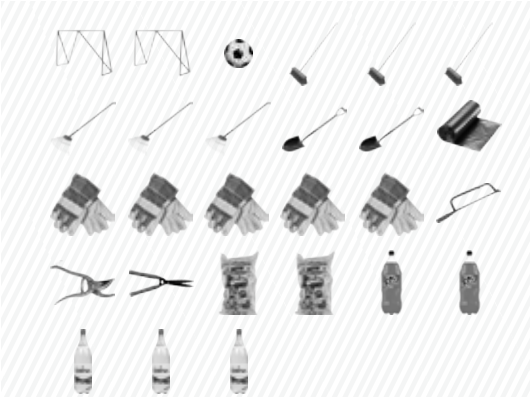
SPACE

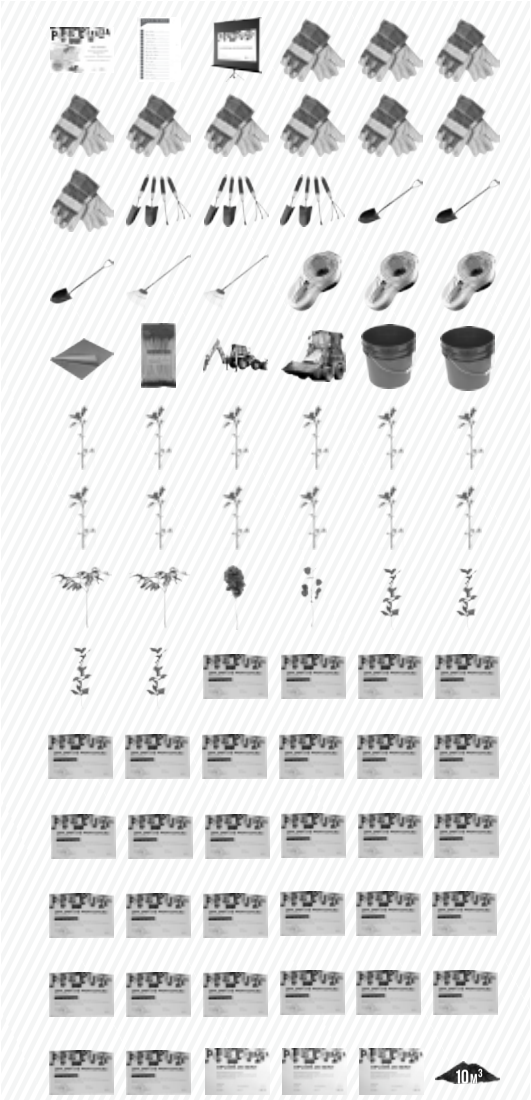






OBJECTS




10m³

COSTS


actions
materials
labor
lei (€)
0
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actions
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IN ACTIVATING A NEGLECTED SPACE

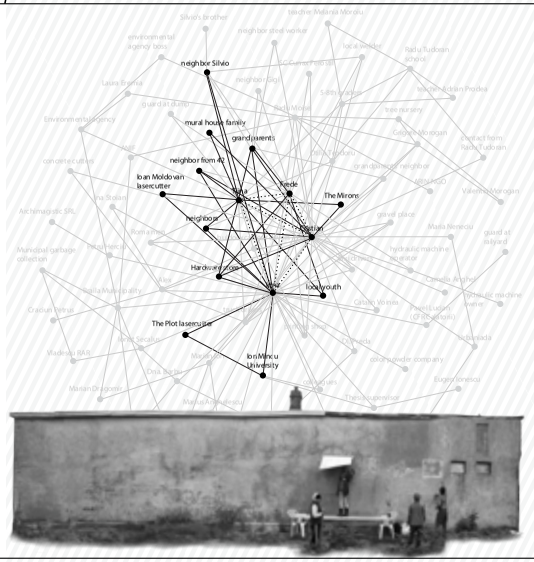
COMMUNITY

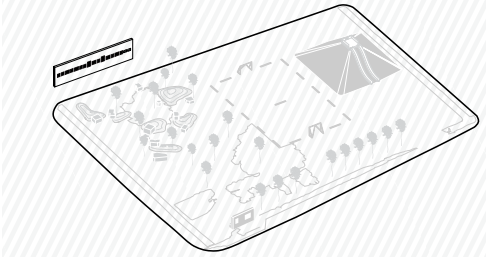
SPACE

OBJECTS

MEMORY MURAL

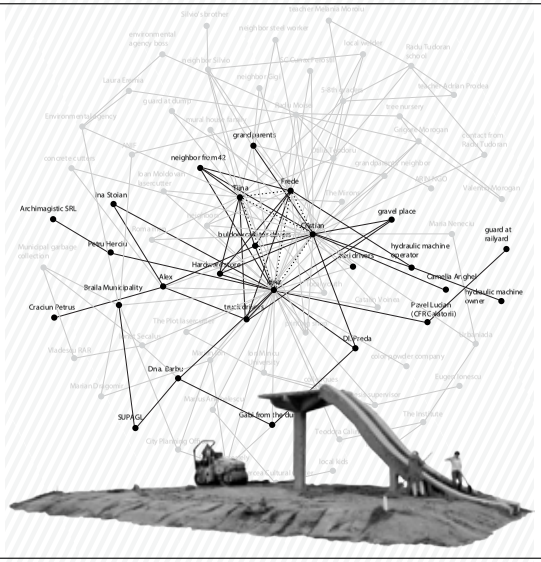
As no records existed of the space, we sought information from neighbors through dialogue. One-on-one, informal discussions provided those who were not involved in the more public activities an **alternative mode of participation** – forming social connections and building empathy. Anecdotes about scratches, skirmishes and playthings were shared on paper when words were not enough. These drawings were reproduced in a larger format later and transferred onto an empty wall bordering the park using stencils and spray paint. The wall was not treated or cleaned in any way, the drawings forming another **layer of time** over an already weathered surface. The once private, singular relationships between the local residents and the park space are now gathered onto a single wall and publicly shared – a common ground for **collective memory**.

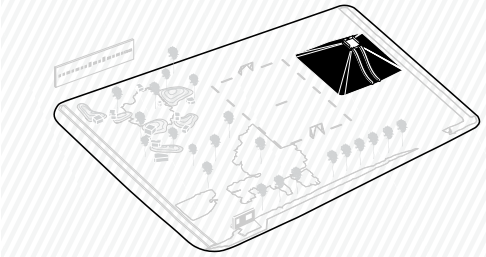




PYRAMID

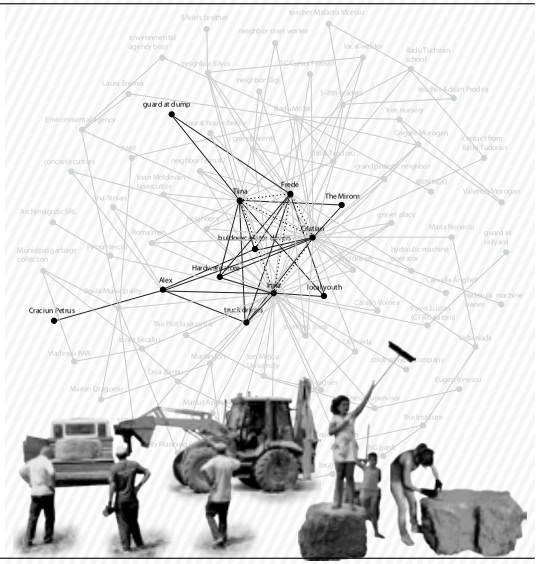
A 5.5 meter high concrete slide is all that remains of the old park. The stairs and railing have long ago been taken, yet kids still climb on the crumbling, unsafe structure. The slide also acts as a symbol and landmark, lending the space its **identity**, and retaining a **connection to the past** for both young and old residents. An adaptation of an earth retaining wall construction was chosen to reinforce the concrete slide and provide a safe way to climb to the top. Part of the original park's history is now encased in earth donated from a local construction site and concrete railway ties sourced from across the street. Beyond purposes of safety and preservation, the pyramid remains intentionally **indeterminate** in function, leaving its uses open to interpretation.

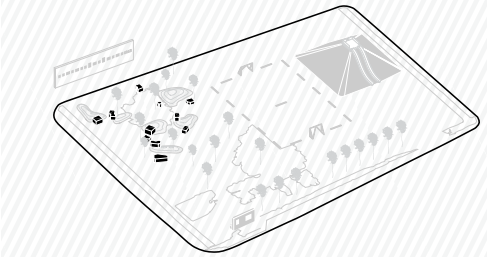


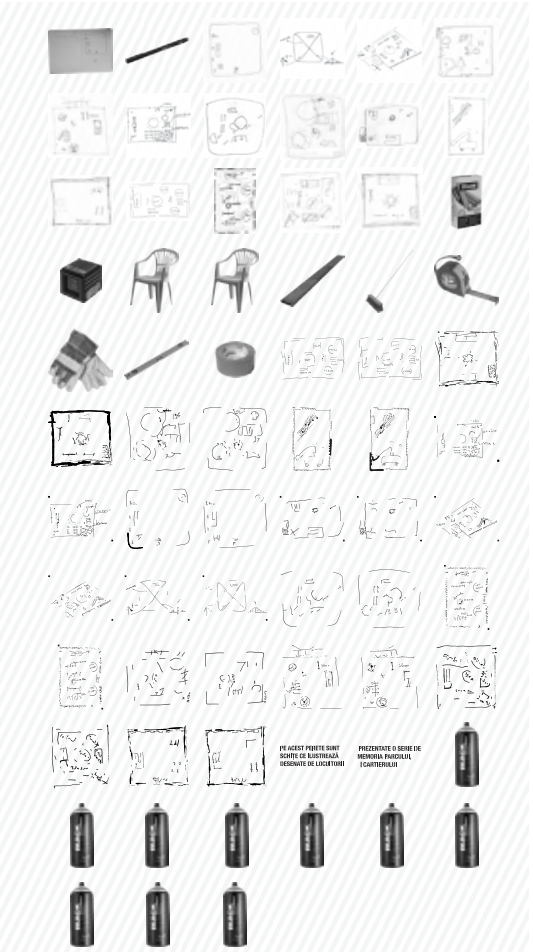


CONCRETE BOULDERS

The situation of **material scarcity** in neighborhood led to alternative solutions in the park design. Scrap metal and firewood collection along with a lack of maintenance contribute to the deterioration of public amenities in Chercea. 11 large, concrete boulders – pieces of industrial ruins – were found on the periphery of the neighborhood and transported into the park. Arranged in a seemingly random manner, their placement into loose clusters gives their users a wider choice of where to rest, play or chat, while remaining a clear zone for socialization. These previously **forgotten objects were given new value** though relocation and surface treatment. By polishing the top to a smooth terrazzo finish, the boulders changed from junk object to an object of use.



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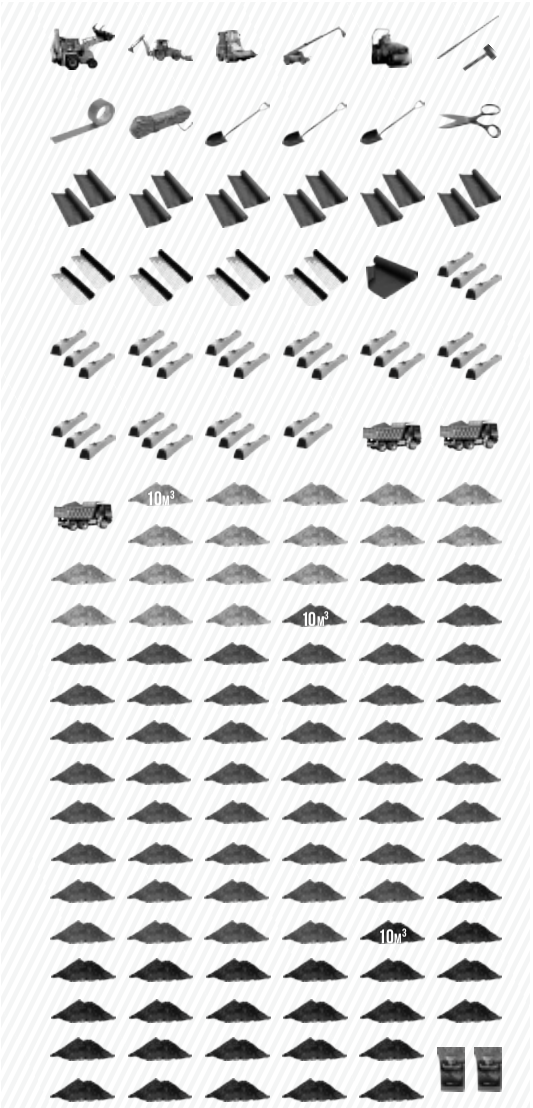
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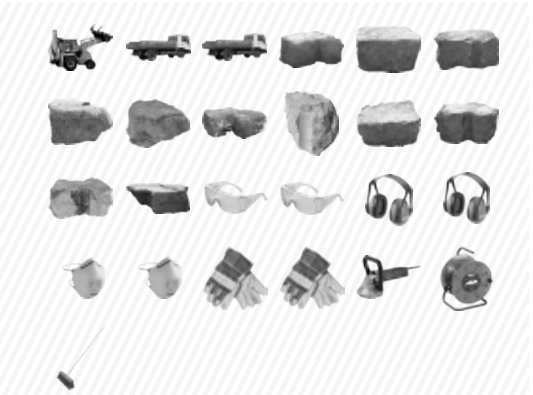

COSTS


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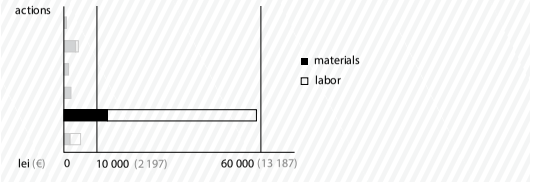
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actions
materials
labor
lei (€)
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Images of interventions accompanying the posters.

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Arhipera, casa Fam. Enache, Belciugatele, completed 2014, image 2016. Own image.

part II

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